

Alice

and the
Heart of Madness



A sapphic retelling of **Alice in Wonderland**

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Chapter 1

Down the Rabbit Hole

Alice sat on the cool grass by the lake at the park near her London townhouse, her knees drawn up, hands clasped neatly around them. The mid-afternoon breeze skimmed the surface of the water, nudging small ripples outward. Her long blond hair shifted lightly against her shoulders, loose ringlets brushing her neck. She had taken care to arrange it just so before leaving the house, though no one was likely to see her here. It felt important, somehow, that it remained orderly, even if the rest of her thoughts refused to comply.

She stared at the lake's surface, her reflection warped and broken by the ripples. She wondered how long it had been since she'd last truly recognized the girl who looked back. She had always been told she was a beautiful girl, with blue eyes framed by a delicate face. Then, as she grew up, the body of a woman who would break the hearts of young men and bear them many children. Yet, as of late, that was not the reflection that stared back at her. It wasn't her face that had changed. She raised her chin slightly as if the reflection might offer an answer, but the movement only stretched the illusion thinner, the face on the water distorting until it dissolved entirely.

Behind her, children's laughter burst. She didn't turn to look. Their joy felt so distant, a world apart from her own, where time seemed to move sluggishly, dragging her along without purpose. She could hear a girl shrieking with delight, and a boy shouting about a dragon or a shipwreck, their voices rising and falling in animated bursts. She used to play like that once—didn't she? But the memory felt so faint it might not have been hers at all.

Her hands tightened around her knees. It was silly to feel this way, she told herself. She was still young, wasn't she? Fresh out of school, her life stretched out before her, filled with possibility. That's what everyone said, at least. But what kind of possibility? What sort of future? Her mind flitted to the endless questions she could never answer. What would she do? Where would she go? Who would she become? She was expected to know these things, expected to answer quickly, as though certainty were as natural as breathing. Yet the more she tried to hold onto an answer, the more it slipped through her fingers.

The lake's surface shifted again, catching the pale sun in a way that stung her eyes. She looked away, toward the clouds overhead. She laid back on the grass to observe. They were soft and shapeless, drifting lazily across a pale blue sky. She envied them, the way they moved without effort or expectation, carried wherever the wind decided. They seemed content to simply be, their existence requiring no explanation or apology. She imagined what it might feel like to float that way, unburdened, untethered.

Her chest tightened, the thought both comforting and unbearable. She exhaled sharply, pulling her mind back to the ground. The grass beneath her palms was cool and damp, the scent of earth faint but insistent. She focused on it, grounding herself, counting each blade she could feel under her fingertips. One, two, three... The exercise always worked for a time, though it never lasted long.

Then a shadow fell over her, a head blocking out the sun appearing upside down just above her own.

"Clouds make terrible conversationalists, don't they?" The voice broke through the stillness. Alice sat up sharply, her ringlets bouncing in protest.

Crouching behind her with the unabashed curiosity of a child inspecting an insect was a tall, gangly woman no older than her twenty-four-year-old sister Lorina with a face of strong yet harmonious features framed by unruly black hair, and her grin was as wide and untamed as the

breeze. With her large top hat labeled "10/6", a brightly colored tailcoat, patterned trousers, oddly paired stockings, and oversized cravat, the woman whose skin reminded Alice of the warmth of the earth after a summer rain offered a playful grin.

"Excuse me?" Alice said, straightening her back. Her voice came out firmer than she'd intended, a reflex more than a choice.

The woman cocked her head, her top hat teetering precariously but never falling, and repeated as if it were obvious, "The clouds."

"T-terrible indeed," Alice replied, attempting to match the woman's nonchalance, "Their discussion is always up in the air."

"Ah, but what a view they must have! To see the world from such heights, unfettered by the chains of the ground." The woman's brown eyes, textured like the grooves of tree bark, sparkled with mirth, "Silent, yes, but dreadfully poor at keeping secrets. Why, just look at them, spreading rumors of rain far and wide without a single shred of evidence!"

"Rumors of rain?" Alice echoed, her thoughts pirouetting in an effort to keep pace with the woman's logic.

"Quite so! But tell me," the stranger continued, her head tilting quizzically as she righted herself with a grace that belied the oddity of her movements, "have you ever wondered why we whisper to flowers but shout at the stars?"

Alice's mouth parted, no ready answer perched upon her lips.

"Because," Alice ventured, her voice trailing off into uncertainty, "flowers are nearer, and the stars are so very far away?"

"Ah, proximity!" the stranger exclaimed, clapping her hands with delight, "But even whispers carry weight, my dear, and stars are excellent listeners. They're just terribly forgetful when it comes to replying."

"Is it freeing then, to be so... unbound?" Alice asked.

"Like a bird without wings!" The woman said, flipping upright with a flourish.

Before Alice could ponder the absurdity of wingless flight, a furry blur dashed past them. A White Rabbit whose eyes glanced her way but did not see Alice. Or did it? She blinked. There was nothing extraordinary about it, she told herself. Nothing. And yet, its small feet thudded against the earth with a rhythm that echoed in her chest.

She heard it muttering—soft words, hurried words, words not meant for her, "Oh dear. Oh dear. I shall be late." Her breath caught, but she said

nothing. Later she would think of this moment and wonder why she hadn't wondered then. But the strange always feels ordinary until it is gone.

The Rabbit paused briefly. It reached into its waistcoat pocket. A watch gleamed in its paw. Time, held in the hands of a creature that should have no need for it. Her pulse quickened.

She rose to her feet. The field around her blurred, softened, became a backdrop to the sharp pull in her chest—curiosity, or was it something deeper? Without deciding, without thinking, she moved. The Rabbit leaped forward, and Alice followed, her feet pressing against grass that suddenly felt too soft to be real.

The Rabbit vanished beneath the hedge, slipping into a hole too large, too dark. Alice hesitated, just for a moment, her breath shallow.

A smile lingered on the strange woman's lips, who had followed the animal, a smile that felt like it knew too much and yet offered nothing.

"Time for tea!" the woman declared urgently, as though the word tea was a secret password to unlock the world.

Before Alice could reply, the woman leaped forward with a startling grace, her coat tails catching the wind like flags of surrender or invitation. She followed the Rabbit, slipping past Alice in a whirl of mismatched stockings and bright colors. Alice watched, frozen by the absurdity—or was it inevitability? She did not even wonder, not yet.

Alice stood alone. The field stretched around her, quiet again, but something beneath her chest twisted and pulled. That hole—the Rabbit, the woman. She stepped forward.

The ground beneath her feet shifted, no longer grass but something softer, unsure. She knelt, peering into the hole, her hands pressing into the edges of reality itself. The darkness below called to her, murmuring promises she couldn't quite hear but felt as a thrum in her bones.

She slid forward, at first deliberately, and then not. The world folded around her like silk unraveling. She was falling—not just through space but through something larger, a sense of time unwinding itself, the past and present splintering into fragments that brushed against her skin.

The world above elongated and distorted, pulling away like taffy in a child's eager hands. Fear clenched at her heart, yet beside her, the woman twirled through the void with a grace born of madness.

"We are going to die! Why are you so calm?" Alice cried.

The woman beside her—hat still somehow securely perched on her head—glanced at Alice with mild curiosity, as though Alice had asked a question about the weather. “Die?” she mused, tilting her head thoughtfully, “Death is merely a doorway, my dear. And what is a doorway but a passage to another room? We are simply... redecorating.”

Alice’s jaw dropped, “Redecorating? We’re falling through a hole in the earth! We’re going to hit the bottom and die!”

“But who says there is a bottom?” the woman replied breezily, spinning once in the air as though this were all a delightful game, “Perhaps we will simply fall forever. A very efficient way to avoid dusting, don’t you think?”

Alice clenched her fists, furious, “Dusting?! Wha...? Who even are you?”

The woman placed a hand on her chest and bowed, “I am the Mad Hatter. Hattie for short. A pleasure to meet you, Miss...?”

She reached out a gloved hand to Alice, her expression one of perfect politeness, utterly unbothered by their supposed impending doom.

Alice glared at the hand, then at Hattie’s impossibly calm face, “I’m Alice. The girl with whom you are about to die.”

“Isn’t this delightful? Do you think this counts as flying without wings?” Hattie asked as they spiraled downwards into the abyss.

Alice’s initial terror morphed into reluctant fascination, coaxed by the absurdity of their shared plummet.

“Perhaps,” Alice conceded, her tone lighter now, “though I’m not entirely convinced of the merits just yet.”

“Give it time. After all, time is simply a rabbit hole of its own.”

“I s-suppose,” she ventured cautiously, the words feeling strange in her mouth, “if one were to fly, this would be a rather unorthodox method.”

“Unorthodox!” Hattie repeated with glee, “Why, I’d say it’s perfectly orthodox here. In fact, I’d wager you’ve been un-flying all your life, anchored to the ground.”

The notion was preposterous, yet as Alice watched Hattie dance through the air with such carefree abandon, she couldn’t help but feel a tickle of something that might have been envy.

“Anchored? I never thought of it that way,” Alice said, “But what about the landing? What happens when we stop falling?”

“Ah,” Hattie said, raising her index finger, “that is the surprise at the bottom of the box, the final note in the symphony. Why worry about the conclusion when the story itself is so enthralling?”

Alice pondered this, finding that her fear was slowly being wrapped up and tucked away, replaced by a budding curiosity toward the enigmatic woman beside her. They continued their descent—or ascent, for directions seemed irrelevant now—in a companionable silence punctuated only by the rustling of fabric against air.

“Are you always so cryptic?” Alice finally asked.

“Only when it suits me. I’ve always been partial to spades—so sharp, so direct, don’t you think? Hearts are all well and good, but they have a tendency to bleed, which can get dreadfully messy. Clubs? Far too brutish, though I suppose they serve their purpose. But diamonds? Ah, diamonds are delightful, but they can be so... cold. Now, if I were to truly suit myself, I’d choose—”

“Is this really the time?! We’re falling to our doom, and you’re analyzing card suits?”

Hattie shrugged mid-fall, spinning languidly in the air as though gravity had no hold on her, “If not now, then when? It’s all a matter of perspective, dear Alice of the Above. After all, one should always consider their options before the hand is dealt.”

Alice couldn’t help it—a chuckle escaped her lips, “You’re impossible.”

“Impossibly charming, I hope. But tell me, Alice of the Above, aren’t you finding our little fall from grace rather... liberating?”

There it was again, that word—liberating. It drifted through Alice’s thoughts, weaving between her carefully constructed sensibilities. She glanced at Hattie, whose presence was as disconcerting as it was compelling.

“Perhaps,” Alice conceded, “Though I suspect my mother would find it most improper.”

“Tell me,” Hattie asked, completely ignoring Alice’s remark, “do you think fish have secrets?”

Alice furrowed her brow, “I suppose they might.”

“Imagine, a fish swimming through your mind, nibbling on your thoughts like they’re plankton.” She twirled a finger around her ear as though winding up a clockwork toy, “What do you think it would find?”

Alice felt a smile tugging at her lips despite herself. There was an enchanting cadence to this woman's madness that beckoned her to play along, "Perhaps it would be puzzled by my human concerns."

"Ah, yes!" Hattie clapped, and her oversized cravat flapped like a flag in celebration, "Concerns! Those pesky pebbles that clutter our pockets and weigh down our souls!"

Alice watched, bemused and bewildered, as Hattie took a dramatic step forward in the air.

"Come, Alice," Hattie said, extending a hand that trembled with a thrill Alice couldn't name, "Let's find what adventures await beyond the edges of 'supposed to' and 'should.'"

Alice's feet found the ground—or what passed for it in this place—with a graceless stumble, her hands flailing for balance. Hattie twirled beside her, landing with the aplomb of a cat, and clapped her hands delightedly at their sudden halt from freefall to floor.

"Welcome to the Hall of Expectant Doors," Hattie announced, sweeping an arm across the view before them.

The hall stretched endlessly, lined with doors of all shapes and sizes. Some were imposing, with heavy brass knockers shaped like lion heads, while others were so tiny they seemed made for mice.

"Locked doors, every one," Alice said with a hint of frustration, "What use is a door if it remains forever closed?"

"But Alice of the Locked-Out Logic," Hattie said, tapping her cheek, "isn't the mystery of what lies behind half the fun?"

"Fun is one word for it," Alice muttered, glancing warily at the silent doors.

Hattie skipped to a brightly painted door and pressed her ear to it with exaggerated curiosity, "Perhaps they're shy. Or maybe they're singing, and we've simply missed the invitation to join."

"Invitations are rarely extended to me," Alice admitted, the words slipping out unguarded, "I've never been one for fitting in."

"Fit in? Here?" Hattie laughed loudly, "Why, Wonderland is the grand ball where square pegs revel in their squareness! Round holes be damned!"

Alice smiled, "Then let us find a key. Locked or not, these doors must lead somewhere."

"What is a lock but an invitation to test one's wits?"

Alice approached a small glass table in the center of the hall. On it lay a tiny, golden key and a bottle with a label that read, “Drink Me.”

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Alice whispered, her hand hovering over the key.

“Curiosity is a compass to the stars,” Hattie said, “What do you think the potion does? Expands your thoughts? Shrinks your worries?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Alice said, inspecting the bottle. Its clear liquid seemed ordinary, yet its promise felt anything but.

“Only one way to find out! What’s the worst that could happen? You might find a new perspective.”

“Or disappear entirely,” Alice countered. But even as she said it, the concern felt distant and small in a place like this.

“Then disappear you must!” Hattie declared dramatically, “For in vanishing, you may just find yourself.”

Alice hesitated, then uncorked the bottle. She took a sip, the taste both sweet and unfamiliar. Almost immediately, a strange sensation took over, as if her body were folding inward. She looked down to see herself shrinking, the room growing impossibly large until the table towered over her like a monument.

“Drat!” she squeaked, staring up at the key still out of reach.

“Isn’t this a twist?” Hattie said, peering down at Alice, “You’ve become quite the little conundrum.”

“Indeed,” Alice replied, her irritation rising, “But I’m no closer to opening these doors—and now I can’t even reach the key!”

“Perhaps the key isn’t about reaching upward, but about seeing the world differently.”

Alice frowned but found a strange comfort in Hattie’s words. As frustrating as this was, there was a peculiar wonder to her new perspective.

“Very well. Even at this size, I am Alice, and I won’t be stopped by something as simple as proportions.”

Hattie smiled.

Alice’s gaze wandered again until she noticed a plate with a small cake nearby. Frosted in pastel swirls, it bore the words “Eat Me” in elegant lettering. The cake beckoned, offering yet another change.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Alice murmured.

Hesitant, but surprisingly bold, Alice reached for the treat. As her small fingers brushed the frosting she pondered what this indulgence could

bring—wonder or disaster?

“Remember, dear, every delight comes with its own flavor of consequence.”

“Then let it be a flavorful one,” Alice said as she broke off a piece of the cake.

She placed the morsel in her mouth, its sweetness spreading instantly. As she swallowed, the world shifted. The walls stretched, the ceiling soared higher, and the furniture shrank rapidly until it looked like dollhouse trinkets.

Alice felt her body growing, expanding in every direction. Her limbs stretched as if she were a balloon being filled, and her breath hitched as the transformation overwhelmed her. The room, which moments ago had loomed large, now felt small and fragile beneath her towering frame.

“Most remarkable,” she whispered, her voice resonating like a low rumble in the vast hall.

“Well, you’ve certainly grown into your confidence now!” Hattie said with a laugh.

Alice struggled to adjust. Her towering perspective made her feel like she was balancing on a tightrope.

“Confidence?! This doesn’t feel like confidence, Hattie.”

“But size is only a metaphor, dear Alice. You’ve brought more than just your skirts into this room—you’ve brought your presence! And I must say, the view is spectacular. You wear ‘larger than life’ quite well.”

Alice’s cheeks burned as a blush spread quickly, “I... I—what are you even saying?” she stammered, feeling the heat rise to her ears as Hattie’s playful gaze lingered.

“Merely an observation, dear Alice of the Above,” Hattie said smoothly, “I wouldn’t want you thinking I hadn’t noticed.”

Alice turned her face away, fighting to hide her embarrassment, though a small smile betrayed her.

“Presence is one thing,” Alice said, trying to steer the conversation back, “But control is another matter entirely.”

“Control is overrated,” Hattie said with a dismissive wave of her hand, “Being in control means being predictable, and predictability kills wonder!”

Alice wanted to argue, to defend the importance of structure and order. But as she stood there, impossibly tall in a hall full of locked doors, she

began to see the appeal of Hattie's point—though it was cloaked in riddles and nonsense, much like Hattie herself.

She glanced at the woman, whose grin was both maddening and magnetic, and felt her resolve falter. How could someone be so completely absurd and yet so captivating? It was infuriating—and, she had to admit, a little wonderful.

Letting out a weary sigh, Alice said, "Perhaps I am a bit... overwhelmed."

"Understandable, my colossal conundrum. But don't worry! Every puzzle has a solution, every riddle an answer, and every giant girl a—"

"Please, Hattie," Alice interrupted, "Spare me the riddles. My current size is crushing enough."

"Very well. We shall find a way to return you to a more... manageable height."

Alice exhaled deeply, relieved by the brief ceasefire. Yet even as she stood there, far too large for her surroundings, a part of her found comfort in the absurdity—and in Hattie's irrepressible charm.

Chapter 2

The Pool of Tears

Hattie danced lightly around Alice, “What’s small enough to be overlooked but big enough to matter?”

Alice, feeling out of place and overwhelmed, tried to focus. The question pulled at her logic, but in this world, logic felt like a foreign language, “Time?”

Hattie spun, her mismatched stockings flashing, “But time is vast, my dear. It stretches and shrinks, but never ignores. Try again!”

She tossed another riddle over her shoulder, “What begins with a whisper, grows with a shout, and disappears when you search for it?”

“A secret?” Alice guessed, frustration creeping into her voice.

“No, no! Secrets grow quiet when you shout,” Hattie said, skipping in circles, “Think again!”

Alice opened her mouth to argue, but Hattie flung yet another riddle her way, “What has no sides but infinite edges, no center but every beginning?”

“That’s not even a question!” Alice snapped.

“It most certainly is! If I can ask it, it’s a question. The answer, though? Ah, that’s another riddle entirely!” Hattie twirled, her laughter only adding to Alice's growing irritation.

“What’s heavier than silence but lighter than a sigh?”

“What can you see only when you aren’t looking directly at it?”

“What stands still but moves you forward?”

“Enough!” Alice finally cried, throwing her hands in the air, “None of these have answers, do they?”

Hattie froze mid-spin, tilting her head as if genuinely puzzled, “Of course they do. You’re just asking the wrong questions, sweet Alice of the Above.”

Alice clenched her fists, her chest tightening. Logic had failed her here, and this place seemed designed to thrive on chaos. Hattie embodied it perfectly.

“This madness... it’s all too much!” Alice’s voice cracked as tears began to fall. They streamed down her cheeks, pooling at the hem of her dress and shimmering on the checkered floor below.

Hattie stopped, watching her with curiosity. Her gaze was steady, her expression thoughtful, as if Alice’s despair was something to be studied rather than soothed, “Madness, dear Alice? But isn’t that just reality viewed through a curious-looking glass?”

Alice wanted to argue, to push back against the disorder, but her voice caught in her throat. She currently felt utterly insignificant, a giant in stature but so small inside.

Her tears fell faster, their soft patter the only sound in the room. She covered her face, trying to stifle the sobs that shook her, but they came anyway.

Hattie opened a grand umbrella she had produced from thin air, stepping into it as though floating on a tide of tears was the most natural thing in the world. She balanced effortlessly, holding the umbrella steady as it bobbed on the water.

“I’ve always wanted to row in a teacup, but this will do!” Hattie declared cheerfully.

Watching Hattie steer her “boat,” Alice called out, her voice trembling, “Hattie! How can you stay so calm in all of this?”

Hattie tilted her head, “Darling, chaos is just a friend in an unruly costume. Besides,” she added, her tone softening, “it’s more fun to ride the waves than be drowned by them.”

Alice blinked, “Fun?” she repeated weakly, “Is this all just a game to you?”

“Life, love, tears,” Hattie sang, her voice lilting, “They’re all threads in the same unexpected tapestry. Wouldn't you agree?”

Alice’s tears swelled again, the hall flooding with her sorrow until the White Rabbit darted through the water, his usual panic in full force, “Excuse me! Pardon!” he cried, clutching at a pocket watch. In his rush, he dropped something, and it floated toward Alice—a delicate fan.

Trembling, Alice snatched it up and began to wave it desperately, her need for control outweighing her confusion. As she fanned herself in an attempt to dry her tears, she felt a strange shift. Her towering frame retreated, her body shrinking until she was a more manageable size. The hall, once suffocating, expanded around her, its chandeliers gleaming high above like distant stars.

Alice floated on the watery surface, her dress billowing like petals in the tide. Looking up, she found Hattie perched in her umbrella, smiling down with outstretched arms.

“Ahoy, more-manageable-sized traveler! Come aboard the HMS Nonsense!”

With Hattie’s help, Alice climbed into the umbrella. Somehow, it had plenty of space for both of them.

Hattie conjured an oar seemingly from nowhere and began to paddle, “Shall we head for the edge of reason or the shores of the fantastical?”

Alice could only watch, her bewilderment growing. The world she thought she knew was unraveling, and for the first time, she wondered if letting go might help her find her way.

The hall faded behind them, and the tears that had shaken Alice became distant, gentle waves. Hattie steered them lazily, her strokes calm and deliberate.

“Comfort comes in many forms,” Hattie said, pulling a soft blanket from thin air. She draped it around Alice’s shoulders. Then, leaning in, she placed a gentle kiss on Alice’s cheek.

“Thank you,” Alice whispered.

Their umbrella-boat glided through the pool of tears peacefully for so long that Alice lost track of time.

“Botheration!” squeaked a drenched Mouse paddling furiously alongside them suddenly, his tiny paws splashing with the indignity of someone whose tea had just been spilled, “Being wet is the most wretched of discomforts!”

“Indeed! To be wet is to carry not only water but the weight of worry,” quacked a Duck, its feathers slick and dripping.

“Twice the burden? Nonsense!” chimed in a soggy Dodo, struggling to maintain composure despite its drenched state, “It’s thrice if you count the constant expectations society heaps upon us!”

Caught in the midst of their peculiar debate, Alice frowned. Their arguments spiraled into absurdity, each more outlandish than the last.

“Are they always like this?” she asked Hattie, glancing at the unhinged trio.

“Like the phases of the moon, my dear. Frustration and fascination—they’re two sides of the same coin.”

Alice pondered this as the creatures’ voices blended into incomprehensible chatter.

Hattie reached into her pocket and somehow pulled out a perfectly intact lily, “When life gives you lemons,” she said, twirling the flower by its stem, “you write them poetry! But with tears, we can make teardrop soup!”

“Teardrop soup?” Alice repeated. The idea seemed as practical as catching smoke with her hands.

“Precisely! A dash of whimsy, a sprinkle of laughter, and voilà! A feast for the soul!”

Alice sighed, her brow furrowing, “Surely there’s a way out of this mess,” she said, her frustration spilling over as she gestured toward the rising waters.

“Out?” Hattie grinned, “My dear, we’re all quite ‘out’ already—in one way or another.”

“Fine,” Alice said, trying to remain calm, “Then how do we stop the flooding?”

“Stopping,” Hattie mused, leaning on the oar, “is simply starting not to begin. Why stop the tide when you can ride the waves?”

Alice opened her mouth to argue but found herself at a loss. With a sigh, she surrendered, “What would you have us do, then?”

Hattie leaned closer, her voice dropping conspiratorially, “Why not indulge in the wonder? After all, isn’t it marvelous to float in an ocean of your own making? Tell me, Alice, have you ever danced on a droplet or ridden ripples like a carousel?”

The unexpected charm of the question caught Alice off guard. A small smile tugged at her lips, easing the weight of her soaked clothes and the

strangeness of her surroundings. For a moment, the absurdity didn't seem so overwhelming—it almost felt magical.

Hattie smiled back.

“Perhaps I haven't,” Alice admitted, her tone softening as a hint of lightness returned, “But I suppose there's a first time for everything, even in a place as mad as this.”

The pool of tears began to shift, the once still water giving way to a restless current that rippled with a will of its own.

“Come along, Alice! The current's in a rush—let's not be left adrift!”

Alice was no sailor, nor had she ever imagined herself paddling through such a peculiar ocean. And yet, here she was, considering the wisdom of following a woman so delightfully at home in madness.

“Very well. I'll find my way out of this bedlam. But perhaps... Hattie knows something of escape.”

The thought gave her just enough courage to paddle with Hattie, who had produced another oar from nowhere. Her movements were awkward, her soaked dress clinging heavily to her, but determination pushed her forward. A faint smile tugged at her lips, surprising her with its sudden presence.

Hattie glanced back, “Ah, Alice! Perhaps you'll learn to revel in my riddles and ride the rapids of the ridiculous yet.”

Chapter 3

A Caucus Race and a Long Tale

Glistening drops of water clung to Alice's lashes as she blinked, her once-neat ringlets now plastered to her cheeks like strands of seaweed. The pebbly beach beneath her was no ordinary shore; the stones were curiously shaped, each one smooth and polished as if worn not by waves but by hands that had spent centuries arranging them. Some were etched with tiny runes, others with illustrations that shifted and shimmered when glimpsed from the corner of one's eye.

When Alice shifted uncomfortably, she noticed the stones didn't simply stay put—they shuffled slightly underfoot, as though finding new positions to suit their mysterious purposes. Around her, a soggy assembly of creatures made for a bedraggled sight: a Mouse wringing out its tail, a Duck shaking water from its feathers, a Lory preening wet plumage, and an Eaglet awkwardly fluffing its soaked wings.

"Curse the wetness!" the Mouse squeaked, its tiny paws working furiously. The Duck squawked in agreement, glaring at the group. "Who thought diving into that pool was a good idea? What folly!"

Alice blinked at the stones again. Were they glimmering brighter now, or was that just the lingering dampness playing tricks on her eyes? She crouched to pick one up, but before she could, the pebbles nearest her hand wiggled indignantly, as if warning her not to touch. She gasped, withdrawing her fingers.

“This is no ordinary beach,” the Lory muttered, shaking water droplets in every direction. “Beware the shore that watches back!”

“Quite a damp disaster,” the Duck chimed in, ruffling its feathers.

“Most disagreeable,” the Eaglet added, tripping over a pebble as it tried to maintain dignity.

Amidst their bickering, Hattie emerged from the water, dripping but grinning, her top hat miraculously still perched on her head, “That was refreshing! Who’s up for another swim?” she flipped her hat upside down, and water began pouring out—a veritable cascade far too immense to fit in a hat of its size. Alice gawked as a tiny fish wriggled free, flopping onto the grass before darting back into the water. Moments later, a larger fish splashed out, flapping indignantly before following suit.

But the spectacle didn’t end there. With a creak and a groan, a massive pirate ship emerged from the hat’s depths, complete with tattered sails and a crew of perplexed parrots squawking orders at one another.

Hattie gave the hat a firm shake, dislodging the last few droplets, then flipped it upright and plopped it back onto her head with a satisfied grin.

“You’re completely mad,” Alice muttered, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

Hattie placed a hand over her heart and gasped, “Thank you!”

The Mouse shivered, casting wary glances at the water, while the others continued their quarrels. Alice, despite herself, felt the corners of her lips twitch. A small ribbon of laughter unfurled within her, loosening something tightly wound inside.

The squabbling reached its peak when the Dodo waddled forward, a sash reading “Race Master” draped proudly across its chest. With a brisk flap of his wings, he silenced the group and declared, “We must dry off immediately! A caucus race is the only solution!”

Alice tilted her head, “What’s a caucus race?”

Before the Dodo could answer, Hattie interjected, “It’s a race where everyone wins—except those who don’t.”

“But how can that be? Surely there must be some kind of—” Alice hesitated, realizing reason held little sway here. Still, she pressed on, “Could you elaborate?”

Hattie shrugged, “Oh, you’ll see. It’s more fun to be confused.”

The Dodo cleared his throat and began explaining, “Firstly, you start whenever you like and finish... well, whenever you don’t.”

Alice blinked. The creatures shifted restlessly as the Dodo continued.

“Secondarily, the path is... or perhaps it isn’t. Circles are the thing, unless they’re not,” he said with a puff of his chest, adjusting his sash.

The Mouse’s whiskers twitched, the Duck squawked irritably, and the Lory fluffed its feathers as they grew impatient. Whatever rules the Dodo had intended to share were abandoned as the group decided they had heard enough—or perhaps too much.

In an anarchic burst of movement, the creatures erupted into a dizzying race, limbs and feathers flailing as they circled haphazardly. Sand flew everywhere, creating a storm of miniature mayhem that peppered the salty air.

“Rules are such tedious things,” Hattie said to no one in particular, watching the commotion with an amused smile. The creatures kicked up sand as they dashed about, their shouts mixing with squawks and squeaks in a spectacle of utter confusion.

Alice stood at the edge of the commotion, bemused, as the Eaglet collided with the Duck, the resulting squawks providing the perfect soundtrack to their clumsy dance. Amidst the pandemonium, Hattie reappeared, her grin as wide as ever. She produced two platypuses as though conjured from thin air and handed one to Alice.

“Where do you even pull these things from?” Alice asked.

“Weapons of mass distraction,” Hattie said, ignoring the question.

Alice hesitated, eyeing the absurd creature. The platypus blinked back at her, utterly indifferent to its newfound role in the mess. Tentatively, Alice took it, her fingers more accustomed to teacups than wielding creatures as tools of chaos.

“Go on,” Hattie urged.

A reluctant chuckle escaped Alice’s lips as she raised the platypus like a racket. Together, she and Hattie orchestrated gentle turmoil, toppling the unsuspecting Mouse and Eaglet into a heap. The sand caught them softly, their indignation muffled by laughter that rose from Alice’s chest.

Hattie's laughter joined hers, "Madness," Hattie whispered between giggles, "is the loom upon which we weave our days."

The caucus race eventually fizzled out, replaced by a spirited argument. With no finish line to determine a winner, the creatures bickered over who had dried off the most.

"Clearly, my feathers shed the most water," the Duck announced, fluffing itself indignantly.

"Absurd!" retorted the Lory, ruffling its damp plumes, "I'm practically a desert compared to you."

Alice observed the squabble with detached amusement. "My cat, Dinah, would have enjoyed this scene," she said, picturing her feline friend chasing the birds with gleeful precision.

The creatures froze. The Mouse, mid-whisker wring, stiffened as its tail twitched nervously, "A cat?" it squeaked, eyes wide with terror.

The crowd fell silent, their earlier arguments forgotten. The Mouse stepped forward, trembling, "Cats are monsters! Claws of doom! Eyes aglow! They stalk and slink, ready to pounce on honest rodents like me!"

The Duck flapped its wings, "Why, I once met a cat so cunning it convinced me I was a chicken ready for roasting! Nearly lost my tail feathers!"

"I've seen them bat at their prey like a maestro teasing piano keys," added the Lory with a shudder, "It's a game to them!"

The tales grew taller, painting cats as mythical beasts of unmatched terror. Hattie leaned close to Alice, "You've unleashed a tidal wave of trauma," she whispered with mock seriousness, "Well done!"

Alice blinked, torn between guilt and a reluctant smile. The uproar was absurd, but there was a strange charm to it all.

"Oh, but Dinah's very sweet!" Alice stammered, trying to soothe the Mouse, "She wouldn't hurt anyone!"

Her words were met with scoffs and squawks. The Mouse bristled, "Hurt? Hurt! Cats are tyrants of fur and claw!"

The Duck nodded fervently, "I've seen one stare at a puddle until the fish jumped out just to escape its gaze!"

As their tales spiraled into absurdity, Alice watched the commotion with a mixture of disbelief and amusement.

A peculiar sensation tickled at the edges of Alice's awareness, subtle as the brush of a cobweb. Hattie appeared beside her, close enough for their

shadows to mingle on the pebbled shore.

“Running in circles can be quite the conundrum,” Hattie mused.

Alice turned to her, eyebrows knitting. Hattie leaned closer, her movements loose and deliberate, like the words that flowed effortlessly from her, “Consider the loops these creatures run, both in body and mind. A never-ending dance of fear and fancy. Fascinating, isn’t it?”

Alice couldn’t help but feel drawn into Hattie’s whimsical observations. It was nonsense, surely, but nonsense that made her think.

“Is it truly running if there’s no destination?”

“Perhaps they’re not looking for an end,” Alice said, hesitating, “but an escape?”

“Ah, but isn’t escape just the pursuit of a new beginning?”

The more Alice tried to hold onto Hattie’s words, the more they slipped away. Yet, she laughed.

“If you run in a circle and end up where you started, have you gone anywhere at all?”

Hattie’s grin widened, “Or everywhere! Depends on how you see it.”

“You’re impossible,” Alice muttered, but her lips betrayed her with a reluctant smile.

The beach around them remained a theater of absurdity. Waves lapped at the shore, pebbles chattered underfoot, and damp creatures argued over who was the driest. Alice, standing at the heart of it all, felt her grip on logic loosen.

She watched Hattie. Was madness, Alice wondered, simply a matter of perspective? Perhaps, here in Wonderland, she was the odd one—clinging to reality’s compass in a land that required none.

The Dodo flapped to the center of the beach, his chest puffed out like a self-important judge, “And the winner is...” he declared, pausing for effect, “everyone! Except for the platypuses. Poor sports, the lot of them.”

The proclamation settled over the assembly, drawing murmurs of agreement and a strange sense of satisfaction. The tumult quieted, and for a moment, the beach seemed almost peaceful.

As the creatures dispersed, each wearing their victory like a badge of honor—though none could say what they had triumphed over—Alice found herself lingering. Her gaze settled on Hattie, who was watching the jubilant crowd. When their eyes met, Hattie’s smile was different, not her usual whimsical grin but something softer, more reserved.

Amid the fading wildness, a warmth spread through Alice's chest, mingling with the irritation and fascination Hattie always stirred within her. She studied the woman—this embodiment of chaos and charm who danced on the edge of madness with the grace of someone who had forgotten the routine yet performed it flawlessly.

Hattie's gangly limbs, all elbows and knees, should have seemed awkward, but instead, they carried a fluid unpredictability, as though she painted the air with every movement. Her face was sharp, softened only by her expressions—smiles brimming with secrets, glances that dared the world to keep up. Her deep brown eyes sparkled, alive with an intensity that pulled Alice closer, no matter how much she resisted. The oversized tailcoat she wore swirled around her like a magician's cloak, masking her thin frame, though not entirely. Beneath the layers of mismatched fabric, the nipples of her small breasts pressed faintly against the undershirt, the fabric pulling ever so slightly where the cravat tucked in. Alice found her eyes lingering there longer than they should, tracing the contours before snapping her gaze away, her cheeks warming.

A strange mix of emotions coursed through Alice—her breath quickened, her chest tightened, and her fingertips tingled with a heat that she couldn't name. Was it fascination? Frustration? Or something altogether different? She didn't know. All she understood was how the world shifted when Hattie was near, leaving her unsteady but unwilling to pull away.

"Everyone's a winner," Hattie said suddenly, snapping Alice from her reverie. Alice considered her words, wondering if she could count herself among them. Perhaps there was victory in surrendering to nonsense, in finding companionship with someone whose madness felt more like art than mayhem.

Hattie's top hat dipped in a ceremonious arc as she grinned, "Onward, sweetness! The best nonsense is yet to come."

Alice smiled. In Wonderland, "best" likely meant the most bewildering, the most nonsensical. Yet Hattie's words carried a strange allure, one Alice found impossible to resist.

"Where are we going?" she asked, though she suspected destinations in Wonderland were as fluid as the rules.

"Ah," Hattie said, twirling a strand of black hair around her finger, "that is the question of questions, isn't it? We're all going somewhere, even

when standing still.” Her grin broadened as if the thought delighted her to no end.

Alice stumbled briefly, then steadied herself. It was a dance, she realized—a give-and-take between certainty and doubt, knowing and unknowing.

“Or everywhere,” Hattie added, “Depends on how you see it.”

For a moment, Hattie’s usual chaos quieted. Her grin softened into something smaller, almost hesitant. There was no flourish, no riddle—just a simple, sincere expression that caught Alice off guard. Much like the smile she had flashed Alice moments earlier. Before she could speak, Hattie reached out, her fingers brushing Alice’s hand.

The touch was light, warm, steady. Hattie’s long fingers wrapped gently around Alice’s, and for a moment, the ruckus around them faded, leaving only this connection.

“Shall we?” Hattie asked, her voice softer now.

Alice nodded, words caught in her throat. She took a deep breath, feeling a sense of calm. As she moved forward, a soft yawn escaped her lips, unbidden.

Hattie chuckled, “Oh, sweetness,” she said, her playful tone returning, “it seems the day has danced you into a daze.” She tilted her head and gestured toward a soft patch of moss beneath a cluster of trees, “Perhaps it’s time for us to rest. Dreamers need sleep just as much as sleepers need dreams.”

Alice blinked, surprised by the suggestion, but the weight of her limbs and the haze in her thoughts agreed.

With a gentle tug, Hattie led her to the mossy bed, and Alice let herself sink into the softness. The world shifted once more as her eyes grew heavy, and this time, it felt almost steady. And then she was gone.

Chapter 4

The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill

As The morning sun spilled golden light over the peculiar landscape, Alice and Hattie resumed their journey.

They had barely started down the path when a flurry of white caught Alice's eye. It was the White Rabbit, darting frantically and muttering under his breath, "The gloves! The fan! Oh, my fur and whiskers, the Duchess will have my ears for keepsakes!"

Concern and curiosity drew Alice in and she stepped closer, "Mr. Rabbit, sir," she called.

But the Rabbit didn't seem to see her at all. Instead, he looked through her as though she were nothing more than a piece of furniture in his world of troubles, "Mary Ann!" he cried suddenly, so forcefully that Alice forgot herself and responded.

"Sir?" she said, stepping forward and giving a curtsy.

"Go to my house this instant and fetch me my gloves and fan! Quick, now!" The Rabbit's tone was sharp, leaving Alice scrambling to process his words.

Still, she felt a peculiar obligation to help him. Whether it was her instinct to mend what was askew or the lure of adventure, she wasn't entirely sure, "Very well, Mr. Rabbit," she replied.

With a quick turn on her heel—a graceful pivot born of years of curtsies and ballroom etiquette—Alice set off toward the Rabbit's house, Hattie following close behind. They wound through the underbrush until a neat little house labeled "W. Rabbit" appeared, as if conjured from the depths of her imagination.

"You know," Hattie mused, gazing at the sky as if it might hold the answer, "I've always wondered what a Rabbit keeps in a house. Carrot furniture? Lettuce lamps? Or perhaps an endless wardrobe of waistcoats—one for each day of the week! Except Mondays, of course. Nobody trusts a Monday."

Alice blinked at her companion, "What are you talking about?"

Hattie shrugged, "Oh, just nonsense. But nonsense is often more sensible than sense, wouldn't you agree? And by the way, that little curtsy back there? Impeccable. Like sunlight dancing on water—graceful, enchanting... utterly you."

Alice flushed crimson, ducking her head, "I—I was just trying to be polite," she stammered, fiddling with the hem of her sleeve.

"Politeness is overrated," Hattie declared, gently tilting Alice's chin with her fingers until their eyes met, "But if it looks as lovely on you as that, perhaps I'll reconsider."

Alice's heart fluttered, and she pulled away, her cheeks burning as the blush crept to her ears, "You're impossible," she muttered with a shy smile.

"And yet, here you are," Hattie teased, "Shall we storm the Rabbit's castle or knock politely? Either works."

Still flustered, Alice turned toward the house, determined not to let Hattie's words—or her own reaction—slow her down, "Let's just get his gloves and fan, shall we?"

"As you wish, sweetness," Hattie said, the term of endearment rolling off her tongue effortlessly.

Without so much as a knock, Alice stepped inside the Rabbit's house. The room was impeccably tidy, each piece of furniture standing stiffly, like students at attention. On a cushioned chair lay the Rabbit's gloves, next to a fan fluttering in a phantom breeze. Nearby, a small bottle stood, its contents gleaming temptingly within its glass prison.

Curiosity tugged at Alice, irresistible and unrelenting. The bottle bore no label, only the silent promise of mystery. Without the weight of propriety to restrain her, she reached for it, raised it to her lips, and drank.

The change came swiftly. The room seemed to shrink, but in truth, Alice was growing. Her limbs stretched, her body expanded, and soon the walls pressed against her, the ceiling brushing her curls. Wood groaned and fabric strained as she filled the house with her now-gargantuan form.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Alice murmured, though her voice rumbled through the room like thunder.

She shifted awkwardly, discomfort biting at her as the house struggled to contain her size. Panic fluttered at the edges of her mind—she was a giant trapped in a dollhouse world.

From outside, Hattie’s familiar voice rang out, “Looks like someone’s been sipping secrets from the stars!”

“Indeed,” Alice replied with a sigh, “I appear to have outgrown my welcome.”

“Outgrown or ingrown, what’s clear is you’re housegrown!” Hattie chuckled, “But fret not, my towering tulip. In a world where caterpillars dispense advice and rabbits are slaves to time, being too big for one’s britches—or in this case, house—is merely another riddle to unravel. And besides, if I may, your breasts do look quite beautiful in that size.” Alice gasped in shock, but had no time to respond as Hattie continued, “Discomfort is but a wrinkle on the dress of life, easily smoothed with the iron of laughter.” She reached through the window to brush away a tear from Alice’s oversized cheek, “When life gives you a house, make housenade!”

The absurdity of Hattie’s words was baffling, but strangely, they soothed her. Alice managed a small smile, “Thank you, Hattie.”

Outside, mayhem erupted as the White Rabbit paced furiously, shouting orders, “An arm! A monstrous arm! Mary Ann—withdraw at once!”

Inside, Alice could only wiggle her fingers apologetically. The Rabbit marshaled his helpers, calling for a lizard named Bill. Armed with a ladder, Bill climbed onto the roof and descended the chimney.

Alice, feeling the tickle of his approach, sneezed—sending poor Bill soaring into the sky like a living cannonball.

“Curiouser and curiouser!” Alice exclaimed, watching Bill’s trajectory, “I do hope he lands safely.”

“Life’s a trampoline,” Hattie said from her new resting spot, perched on the roof, “Or perhaps hopscotch—hop, skip, and jump to the next square!”

Mysterious pebbles started to pelt the house, transforming into small cakes as they landed. Alice couldn’t tell who was throwing them, but still, she picked one up, nibbling hesitantly. At once, she began to shrink, her body contracting until she was small enough to slip out the door.

Hattie leaped gracefully from the roof, landing beside her, “Dash, flash, in a madcap dash!” she chanted, “Flee, free, as fast as tea!”

Together, they darted through the underbrush, pursued by the bewildered Rabbit and his helpers still throwing pebbles at them. Laughter bubbled from Alice as the absurdity of their escape filled her with unexpected joy.

“It seems every step here is a leap into the unknown!” Alice said with exhilaration.

“Such leaps make the best stories,” Hattie replied, bounding alongside her, “And who knows what tale our footsteps leave behind?”

“Perhaps one where size is just a suggestion,” Alice said, feeling lighter with every step.

“Or maybe it’s a story where we’re all waiting to grow or shrink into the roles we’re meant to play.”

“Whatever it may be,” Alice said, her breath quick but her heart full, “I’m beginning to think that in Wonderland, the story writes us as much as we write it.”

“Exactly so! Now let’s keep writing!”

Bounding through the underbrush, Alice’s lungs filled with the fresh, earthy scent of Wonderland’s peculiar flora. The rhythmic woofing of a dog interrupted her thoughts, soft and steady like the flutter of butterfly wings. At the edge of a sunlit clearing sat an enormous puppy, its eyes wide with innocence and its golden coat gleaming in the dappled light.

“My goodness,” Alice murmured, “You’re quite the oversized pup, aren’t you?”

Hattie skipped forward without hesitation, her lanky limbs eager for action. She flung herself into an enthusiastic belly rub session, her hands working vigorously over the puppy’s immense abdomen. The dog’s tail

thumped with delight, sending tremors through the ground like distant thunder, “Who’s a good paradoxical pooch?” Hattie cooed.

Alice watched from a cautious distance, torn between amusement and concern. Each playful nudge from the massive dog seemed capable of toppling a tree, and she shuddered to think what its bark might unleash. Yet, in its eyes, she saw nothing but a pure, childlike desire for play.

“Perhaps,” Alice mused aloud, clutching her dress, “a distraction would do.”

Spotting a large stick nearby, she grabbed it with both hands and flung it across the clearing. The puppy bolted after it, its booming barks echoing joyfully as it chased the stick. A game of fetch ensued, each toss more energetic than the last, until Alice, timing her moment perfectly, grasped Hattie’s hand and whispered, “Now!”

They slipped away, hearts pounding as they darted through the woods. Once the clearing was far behind, Alice slowed her pace, her thoughts drifting as they walked the sunlit path winding through Wonderland.

“I wish to be the size my reflection knows,” Alice said softly, almost to herself, “To walk through this world neither towering nor tiny, but simply as I’m meant to be.”

“Reflections can be such fickle friends,” Hattie chimed, drawing closer. She traced an imaginary pattern on Alice’s cheek with her finger, finishing with a gentle boop on the nose that was slightly smaller than the one Hattie had first encountered in the park a few days ago, “They show us backward, forward, sometimes inside-out. Can you truly trust a mirror to tell the truth?”

Alice furrowed her brow, considering the riddle. The weight of the day hung too heavily on her now to answer back. She stifled a yawn, her gaze falling on a soft patch of moss beneath a low-hanging branch.

Hattie noticed immediately, “Ah, sweetness, the adventurers need to recharge. Let us rest, and tomorrow, we’ll see what secrets this world holds.”

Alice quickly relented, sinking into the plush moss beneath her feet. The cool, earthy scent surrounded her as Hattie settled beside her, humming a soft tune.

Chapter 5

Advice from a Caterpillar

When Alice's eyes fluttered open again, the dawn light revealed a towering mushroom standing proudly amidst a cluster of ferns nearby.

Hand in hand, Alice and Hattie walked towards the mushroom, so grand it could have been the throne of an elfin king, its cap a velvety canopy against the sky.

Atop this regal perch, a blue Caterpillar languished. He was an indolent sovereign, wreathed in swirls of smoke that pirouetted from his hookah like spectral dancers at a ghostly gala. His exhales birthed a rainbow of colors, spiraling upwards, painting the air with ephemeral rings before fading.

Alice's eyes followed the smoke rings as they ascended, her thoughts adrift in their lazy vortex.

Hattie clinked teacups that were somewhere in the recesses of her coat, "A spectacle for the senses, wouldn't you say, Alice, sweetheart?"

"Indeed."

They paused there, two silhouettes framed by the absurd and the beautiful, the very image of contrast.

And the Caterpillar atop his mushroom watched, his antennae twitching with a nonchalance that bordered on philosophy—or perhaps it was simply the tickle of smoke.

The Caterpillar's languid gaze descended upon Alice with the weight of a sigh, its blue form curled atop the mushroom like an apostrophe in conversation with the sky. Each puff from its hookah punctuated the silence until, at last, it spoke.

"Who... are... you?" The words coiled through the air, syllables stretching into a slow waltz, each one taking its time to reach her ears.

Alice blinked, the familiarity of her own name suddenly as elusive as the shifting shapes in the smoke.

"I—I'm Alice," she managed to declare. Her hands instinctively smoothed the white fabric of her dress.

Hattie emerged from a cloud of chromatic whimsy, "And I'm the one who keeps her on her toes."

The Caterpillar regarded them both, and exhaled another ring of smoke that rose and dissipated.

Its nod came slowly, "You'll find yourself soon enough... or you won't." The words were spoken with an air of indifference, "Either way, chew on it."

Alice stood, her thoughts a fluttering flock of unmatched socks—confusing and colorful in equal measure. The notion of finding oneself was, after all, a task even the philosophers in their high parlors deemed Herculean.

"Chew on it," she mused, not quite sure whether this was metaphorical advice or a literal instruction until the Caterpillar lazily gestured towards the mushroom's vast expanse.

"Take a bite from one side to grow, the other to shrink," the creature said.

A choice, then. An action beckoning with the promise of change, yet cloaked in enigma. One side for growth, the other for diminution.

Alice reached out, her fingers brushing the fungal flesh, pondering the duality of a single bite. To grow would be to reach new heights, perhaps to see the world as the eagles do, untroubled by the minutiae that frets the creatures of the earth. To shrink—would it not offer its own form of escape? A world where blades of grass loomed as towers and dewdrops became pools of endless depth.

The decision weighed on her, heavier than the etiquette books stacked by her bedside, each page a litany of rules she could recite but never quite believed.

“Perhaps,” Alice thought, “to choose is also to define oneself.” Was she the girl who yearned to tower or the one who wished to hide beneath the petals of a rose?

Alice’s hand hovered, her fingertips grazing the gills of the mushroom in hesitant inquiry. The Caterpillar above regarded her with indifference so thick it could have been sliced and served on toast.

“But which side is which?” Alice dared to ask.

“Depends on how you define ‘side,’” the Caterpillar replied with a languid puff of smoke that curled around his words like a cat taking a leisurely stretch.

Hattie’s reaction was instantaneous; her hands came together with a clap that startled the birds into composing a new tune, “Oh, I love a good puzzle! This is your chance, Alice. Experiment! Explore! Embrace your inner mushroom connoisseur!”

“Embrace my inner what, now?” Alice muttered to herself, but there was a spark ignited by Hattie’s infectious enthusiasm. She was, after all, a girl who had chased a rabbit down a hole without a second thought; what harm could there be in a small bite?

Her mind had settled and that felt oddly thrilling; Alice pinched a piece of the mushroom between her fingers. She raised it to her lips, the scent earthy and promising adventures untold. Her heart beat a staccato rhythm in anticipation.

“Bottoms up,” she whispered and allowed herself a taste of Wonderland’s peculiar brand of uncertainty.

Alice’s fingers trembled ever so slightly as she plucked two seemingly identical morsels from the mushroom’s vast cap. One piece felt oddly cooler than the other, or perhaps it was just her imagination at play again. She glanced towards Hattie, who stood with an expectant grin.

“What’s the worst that could happen? You’ve already been too big, too small, and just right.” Hattie’s words urged her on.

With a hesitant nod, more to herself than to Hattie, Alice raised the first fragment to her lips. It tasted of morning dew and wildflowers, of things remembered from a dream but not quite placed in waking life. She

closed her eyes, wishing for confidence—or at least, for something less alarming than the last bout of growth spurt.

The effect was immediate. Her world stretched and elongated, pulling her upwards as though she were a sapling coaxed forth by the tender whispers of spring. Her head burst through the canopy of trees, and suddenly she was a lighthouse standing sentinel over a sea of greenery. The forest below her stitched itself into a plethora of hues and textures.

“This is absurd!” Alice cried out. She extended her arms, striking a precarious balance between the sky above and the earth far, far below. Her silhouette cast a long and quivering shadow over the leafy sea, and for a fleeting moment, she became part of its design.

The sheer absurdity of her towering stature sent a giggle rippling through the leaves, a sound that tickled the very branches she now stood level with. Hattie, mere inches from Alice’s gargantuan eyes, craned her neck.

“You’re a natural queen of the forest!” Hattie proclaimed, sweeping an arm out as if to present Alice to an audience of invisible subjects, “Command the treetops, Alice!”

Alice’s cheeks burned a shade pinker than the dawn’s first light, not from embarrassment but from a sudden surge of frustration. This was no time for jests or crowns woven from whimsy and wildflowers. With a huff, she nibbled on the other morsel, bracing herself for yet another reversal of fate.

In the blink of an eye, her perspective plummeted. The mushroom loomed above like a grand, spotted monument. She could have sworn it was smirking down at her.

Hattie knelt beside her miniaturized friend, resting her chin atop her intertwined hands, her brown eyes sparkling with rapture, “Well, aren’t you adorable? A pocket-sized Alice!”

Alice, now small enough to ride upon a dandelion seed, could only scowl up at her companion. Yet, she couldn’t deny the tenderness in Hattie’s gaze, nor the comfort found in standing so close to what she had deemed the heart of Wonderland’s madness.

Alice nibbled with the precision of a watchmaker, balancing the scales of her stature with careful bites. At long last, with a final bite that tasted vaguely of lemon drops and logic, Alice stood—an ordinary girl of an ordinary size, if one could ever be so in this place.

“Finally,” she sighed, straightening her dress, which had seen more transformations than the phases of the moon. Yet even as she reclaimed a familiar proportion, her body continued to betray her.

“Stability is quite overrated anyway,” Hattie said, helping Alice find her footing.

The pair wandered further from the philosophical fungus, the clearing shrinking behind them—this time, naturally. With each step, Alice felt the ground give a little shudder. Her height adjusted in minor but noticeable degrees.

“Ah, the perils of being perfectly pedestrian,” Hattie mused, “One never knows whether to skip or to saunter.”

Before Alice could ponder the merits of either, the air shivered with a sudden flurry of wings. A pigeon, feathers ruffled in indignation, descended upon them with the grace of a falling leaf. It fixed its beady eyes on Alice, neck bobbing with accusation.

“Serpent!” The word pierced the idyllic scene. The pigeon flapped its wings with the fury of a storm at sea, casting displaced air in every direction.

Alice blinked, taken aback by the creature’s fervor. She searched her pockets reflexively, half-expecting to find snake scales or a forked tongue among the lint and loose thread. But no, she was still wholly human, wasn’t she?

“Such mistaken identity! I assure you, bird, I am nothing of the sort.” Her protest went unheard over the beating of wings and the rush of blood in her ears. The pigeon continued its tirade.

“Of all the ludicrous—” Alice began, but Hattie’s laughter cut through the tension.

“Perceptions are as fickle here as the winds,” Hattie said, still chuckling, “But fear not, my sweetheart. In Wonderland, even serpents can wear crowns.”

And with that, they stepped forward, leaving the offended pigeon to its own devices.

“I am not a serpent!” Alice insisted, looking back at the bird. She could feel the echo of her own politeness crumbling.

The pigeon, however, was deaf to the protests of logic and identity, preoccupied with its own frantic manifesto, “Eggs! Precious eggs stolen by slithering, sneaky serpents!” it squawked, feathers ruffling.

The surreal exchange left a sour taste in Alice's mouth, a familiar feeling of frustration blooming within her chest. Here she was again, an outcast in a world where sense seemed outlawed—an alien in her own skin. The accusation, baseless as it was, pricked at her like thorns from a rose bush she had no memory of planting.

"Surely you see I lack the scales or the sinuous grace attributed to such creatures," she stopped, not yet ready to conform to the accusations, but the pigeon was lost in its own fervor, eyes darting, beak pointing; it was judge, jury, and executioner in its avian court.

The flapping wings drummed up a breeze that toyed with Alice's golden locks. She remembered the stifling drawing rooms back home, how they made her feel trapped, but here in this ceaseless oddity, she felt a different kind of confinement—trapped in misunderstanding, confined by a whimsy that refused to acknowledge her truth.

With a sigh, Alice resigned herself to the unyielding nonsense of her surroundings. As the pigeon continued its raucous soliloquy about intruders and injustices, Alice, once the perfect Victorian daughter, found herself able to live with the fact that the pigeon would just have a wrong impression of her.

With an acrobatic flick of her oversized hat, Hattie intervened as if swatting away a bothersome thought, the pigeon retreating into the sky with its grievances trailing behind.

"Feathers will ruffle, and beaks will clatter. Some creatures just can't see greatness when it's right in front of them." The Mad Hatter took Alice's hand and softly brushed her lips to the back of it.

Alice curved the corners of her mouth upwards, her heart fluttered, and for a moment, she felt anchored in this storm.

The shade of a tree was a welcome embrace, as Alice and Hattie settled beneath its boughs. The world seemed to pause, taking a breath with them, and in this fleeting interlude, Alice found her gaze drifting toward her eccentric companion. Hattie lay sprawled upon the grass, her limbs akimbo like the branches of a peculiar tree, her eyes fixed on the sky above.

In the whimsy of the fabric that was Wonderland, Hattie's oddities had been an intricate stitch that sometimes prickled, but now, Alice realized those same quirks were threads of silk caressing the raw edges of her logic.

"See the clouds? They're fluffy enigmas, playing charades with those who dare to guess their shape," Hattie mused aloud.

Alice watched her, a smile blossoming. The Mad Hatter's frame appeared too lanky for this world. Wonder bloomed, a strange and delicate flower in Alice's chest, as she folded her knees closer, a makeshift bulwark against the tumbling tide of madness around her.

"Sometimes, I think the clouds are just the earth's daydreams," Alice ventured, allowing a sliver of fancy to seep into her voice.

"Daydreams, night schemes, all part of the grand masquerade," Hattie replied, her fingers tracing invisible patterns against the blue canvas overhead, "You know, the best adventures are the ones where you lose yourself a little. You're doing wonderfully."

A warmth crept into Alice's cheeks. At that remark, the forest's embrace seemed less daunting, the unknown pathways less treacherous.

Alice unfurled from her primly tucked posture. She stretched alongside Hattie, lying back on the cool grass. Above them, the sky was a canvas painted with the lazy strokes of drifting clouds.

"Marvelous," Alice breathed out, watching a cloud morph from a rabbit to a teapot and then into something indescribable. The rigid corset of logic that had always cinched her thoughts began to unravel, thread by gossamer thread, in the gentle anarchy of Wonderland.

With a hesitant yet curious hand, she reached out, fumbling through the blades of grass. Her fingers found Hattie's, and there was an odd sort of solace in the touch.

Hattie turned her hand over, her thumb drawing languid circles on Alice's palm. It was a gesture as comforting as it was baffling, defying the confines of proper etiquette Alice had been swaddled in since birth.

Alice scooted, the grass a tickling carpet beneath her, closer to Hattie. With an ease born of newfound trust, she rested her head upon the Mad Hatter's chest, where the steady rhythm of a heart as unpredictable as a clock in Wonderland throbbed beneath fabric and flesh.

Hattie's arm snaked around Alice's shoulders and her fingers began to dance through the golden locks, twirling ringlets around her gangly digits in a playful ballet, "Did you know that stars are simply pinholes in the curtain of night? If you peek through, you might spy the moon's secrets—like how it fancies itself a silver spoon, stirring dreams into our slumber."

Alice released a peal of laughter, crystal and bright, at the suggestion. The absurdity was a delightful confection, sweet to the soul. She wrapped her arms around Hattie in a hug and allowed sleep to claim her.

Chapter 6

Pig and Pepper

It had been so long since Alice had felt anything resembling the “right” size that when she finally managed it, the sensation was almost unsettling. At first, she wobbled on her feet, unaccustomed to a body that fit so neatly into the world. Hattie chuckled beside her, “It suits you, sweetness. Though I must say, you were rather grand before—quite the towering beacon of charm.”

Alice shook her head, a small smile creeping across her lips, “If I had stayed that way, I’d frighten whoever lives here out of their wits,” she said, gesturing toward the little house that had come into view. It stood nestled in a clearing, no taller than four feet, as if plucked from a doll’s village.

“True enough,” Hattie mused, studying the house with a squint, “A giant crashing through the front garden might spoil the roses. But imagine the tales they’d tell!” She twirled her fingers.

Ignoring Hattie’s theatrics, Alice reached for the morsel she had nibbled earlier and carefully adjusted her size down to something less alarming, then gave Hattie a piece. Soon, they stood no taller than nine inches, perfectly in proportion with the tiny house, “Well, that’s better,” she

murmured, brushing off her dress as if shaking away the remnants of her former height.

For a moment, they lingered at the edge of the clearing, gazing at the curious little house. Alice pondered what to do next while Hattie hummed an off-key melody that somehow suited the odd quiet of the scene.

Then, a commotion stirred the air—a rustling from the woods, followed by a sharp rap at the door. Both Alice and Hattie turned to see a footman emerge from the shadows. He was dressed in impeccable livery, though his face had the unmistakable sheen of a fish. He rapped briskly on the tiny door with his knuckles, his movements swift and precise.

The door creaked open to reveal another footman, this one with a round face and eyes so wide they seemed more suited to a frog than a man. Alice blinked in surprise, nudging Hattie, “Do you see—?”

“Two footmen. One fishy, one froggy,” Hattie interrupted, “But of course.”

“They’re speaking,” Alice whispered, creeping closer to catch their conversation.

“Eavesdropping, are we?” Hattie teased in a hushed tone, crouching low beside Alice with a conspiratorial grin, “Oh, how deliciously improper. I approve.”

Despite Hattie’s playful tone, Alice couldn’t help but be drawn in, her focus fixed on the peculiar scene unfolding before her. Whatever was happening at the little house seemed as strange and fascinating as everything else in this world.

The Fish-Footman produced a great letter from under his arm, nearly as large as himself, and handed it solemnly to the Frog-Footman, “For the Duchess. An invitation from the Queen to play croquet.”

The Frog-Footman repeated the statement, only with the words rearranged: “From the Queen. An invitation for the Duchess to play croquet.”

Alice clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh, but Hattie had no such reservations, letting out a loud, gleeful cackle, “They’re a duet of absurdity!”

As if to prove her point, both footmen bowed so deeply that their powdered curls became hopelessly tangled, pulling them awkwardly together. Alice’s laughter spilled out like a bubbling stream, forcing her to

retreat into the shadows of the woods so they wouldn't hear her. Hattie followed, leaning against a tree, clutching her sides.

When Alice finally dared to peek back out, the Fish-Footman was gone, leaving the Frog-Footman sitting cross-legged near the door, staring blankly at the sky as though it might offer him profound wisdom.

"Do you suppose he's communing with the clouds?" Hattie mused aloud, twirling a stray lock of hair around her finger.

Alice rolled her eyes, "I suppose I'll have to try knocking. If that doesn't work, you can ask the clouds for advice."

"Maybe they can tell us how to breeze into the house."

Alice stepped forward and rapped lightly on the door. The Frog-Footman glanced at her without moving his head, his expression as blank as before, "There's no sort of use in knocking," he said, "And that for two reasons. First, because I'm on the same side of the door as you. Second, because they're making such a racket inside, no one could possibly hear you."

Alice paused, straining her ears. The house was indeed bursting with sneezing, howling, and the occasional crash.

"Then how am I to get in?" she asked, trying to keep her voice polite.

The Footman didn't answer her directly, instead continuing, "There might be some sense in your knocking if we had the door between us. For example, if you were inside, you could knock, and I could let you out."

Alice glanced at Hattie, who mouthed, *Brilliant logic!*

"That's not helpful," Alice muttered to herself. Louder, she said, "How am I to get in?"

The Footman shrugged with an air of indifference, "I shall sit here till tomorrow—or next day, maybe."

At that moment, the door swung open, and a plate came flying out, skimming past the Footman's nose and shattering against a tree behind him. He didn't flinch.

"Or perhaps the day after," he added, his tone unchanged.

Alice clenched her fists, "How am I to get in?" she repeated, her voice rising.

"Are you to get in at all?" the Footman countered lazily, "That's the real question, isn't it?"

Alice groaned, muttering under her breath, "The way these creatures argue—honestly, it's enough to drive anyone mad!"

“Madness is highly underrated,” Hattie said.

Deciding the conversation was going nowhere, Alice threw up her hands, “There’s no use talking to him—he’s perfectly idiotic!” With a determined push, she opened the door and stepped inside.

The kitchen she entered was a haze of thick smoke, pepper stinging her nose the moment she crossed the threshold. The Duchess sat in the center on a three-legged stool, bouncing a howling baby on her knee. A cook stirred an enormous cauldron over the fire, the air thick with the sharp, choking smell of pepper.

“Too much pepper,” Alice whispered to herself between sneezes.

Beside her, Hattie sneezed dramatically, nearly doubling over before straightening and gasping, “This kitchen is a menace! Even the smoke looks like it’s about to sneeze!”

Alice’s attention turned to a large cat sitting by the hearth, its grin so impossibly wide it seemed to mock the turmoil around it. Remarkably, it and the cook were the only ones immune to the incessant sneezing.

“What a scene,” Alice said, glancing at Hattie, who, despite the pepper-laden air, was watching the grinning cat with a look of delight, “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Immensely,” Hattie replied, “Don’t you just adore a room with personality?”

Alice sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose, “Would you please tell me,” she asked hesitantly, unsure if it was proper to speak first, “why your cat grins like that?”

The Duchess, rocking the howling baby on her knee, glanced at Alice with an air of disinterest, “It’s a Cheshire cat. And that’s why. Pig!”

The sudden outburst made Alice jump, but she quickly realized the word was directed at the baby and not at her. Gathering her courage, she continued, “I didn’t know Cheshire cats always grinned. I didn’t even know cats *could* grin.”

“They all can,” said the Duchess with a shrug, “and most of them do.”

“I don’t know of any that do,” Alice said politely, pleased to have started a conversation, no matter how strange.

The Duchess snorted, “You don’t know much, and that’s a fact.”

Alice bristled at the comment, and just as she was searching for a new topic, Hattie leaned in, “You know, Duchess, I’ve often wondered if it’s not the cats who grin, but the world itself grinning through the cats.”

The Duchess blinked at her, unimpressed, “What nonsense.”

“Precisely!” Hattie beamed.

Before Alice could respond, the noises in the kitchen called their attention. The cook, without a word of explanation, began hurling everything within reach—fire-irons, plates, saucepans—toward the Duchess and the baby. The clatter was deafening, and the baby’s howling reached a pitch Alice didn’t think possible.

“Stop it! Oh, please stop!” Alice cried, hopping from one foot to the other in alarm, “Oh no—watch his nose!” she added, wincing as a particularly large saucepan narrowly missed the baby’s face.

The Duchess, unbothered, growled, “If everyone minded their own business, the world would go round a deal faster than it does.”

“That wouldn’t be much of an advantage,” Alice said, “Think of the chaos it would cause with day and night! You see, the earth takes twenty-four hours to turn on its axis—”

“Speaking of axes,” the Duchess interrupted with a sharp glare, “chop off her head!”

Alice glanced nervously at the cook, half expecting her to comply, but the cook was too busy stirring the soup to pay any attention. Hattie, meanwhile, raised an eyebrow and whispered to Alice, “Don’t worry, my dear. Heads are terribly overrated.”

Alice pressed on, “Twenty-four hours... or is it twelve? I—”

“Oh, don’t bother me with figures!” the Duchess barked. She resumed rocking the baby, shaking it violently at the end of every line of a strange lullaby she began to sing:

“Speak roughly to your little boy,

And beat him when he sneezes:

He only does it to annoy,

Because he knows it teases.”

The chorus erupted, with the baby and even the cook joining in:

“Wow! Wow! Wow!”

Alice stood frozen, torn between horror and disbelief, while Hattie clapped along as though at a raucous concert.

“Quite the melody!” Hattie said, “The percussion section—” She gestured toward the flying plates, “—is inspired.”

Alice glared at her, “This isn’t funny!”

Hattie shrugged, unrepentant, “Oh, my dear, everything here is funny. That’s why it’s so maddening!”

As the Duchess began a second verse, tossing the baby up and down with increasingly erratic vigor, Alice took a step back, clutching Hattie’s arm.

“I speak severely to my boy,
I beat him when he sneezes;
For he can thoroughly enjoy
The pepper when he pleases!”

The chorus of “Wow! Wow! Wow!” echoed through the smoky kitchen, and Alice whispered, “This place is completely insane.”

“Which makes it totally sane,” Hattie replied.

“Here! You may nurse it a bit if you like!” the Duchess said, unceremoniously tossing the squirming baby toward Alice, who barely managed to catch it, “I must get ready to play croquet with the Queen,” she added, sweeping out of the room. As she disappeared, the cook hurled a frying pan after her, missing by mere inches.

Alice staggered under the baby’s weight, the peculiar little creature flailing its limbs in all directions, “It’s like trying to hold a starfish,” she thought as it snorted noisily, doubling itself up and then springing straight again like an over-wound toy.

Hattie, leaning against the doorframe, watched the scene with unrestrained delight. “Well, it’s a good thing it’s not a fish, then—you’d have to worry about it slipping right out of your hands!”

“This baby is a menace, that’s what it is,” Alice muttered as she ignored Hattie, attempting to wrangle the baby into some semblance of stillness. After several tries, she discovered the only way to nurse it properly was to twist it into an improbable knot and hold tight to its right ear and left foot. With Hattie trailing behind, chuckling under her breath, Alice carried the baby outside into the fresh air and sat for a minute.

“If I don’t take this child with me,” she said aloud, “they’re bound to kill it within a day or two. That would be murder.”

The baby grunted in response, and Alice frowned, “Don’t grunt! That’s no way to express yourself.”

“It’s expressing itself just fine,” Hattie said, crouching to peer at the baby’s peculiar face, “Though I must say, that’s an *awfully* piggish grunt for such a small thing.”

Alice ignored her, examining the baby anxiously. Its nose, already turned upward, was looking more like a snout, and its small eyes shrank with every passing moment, “It couldn’t really be...”

The baby grunted again, louder this time, and Hattie leaned closer, “Oh, I do hope it’s turning into a pig. A much better career choice than growing up to be a duchess.”

“Hattie, you’re impossible,” Alice snapped.

“Impossibly entertaining.”

Alice shook her head as she got up, and then continued walking, the baby still grunting and wriggling in her arms, “If you’re going to turn into a pig, my dear,” she said sternly, “I’ll have nothing more to do with you. Mind now!”

The creature grunted again, this time so violently that Alice stopped in alarm. When she looked down, the transformation was undeniable—it was no longer a baby but a small, pink pig.

“Well, that settles it,” Alice said with a sigh, setting the piglet down on the ground, “It’s absurd to carry you any further.”

The pig trotted off into the woods, its little tail wagging happily, and Alice watched it go, “It would have made a dreadfully ugly child, but it’s rather a handsome pig.”

“Handsome indeed,” Hattie agreed, “Though I must say, there’s a certain poetic justice in a pig turning up. After all, you can’t spell ‘proper piggy predicament’ without a good deal of ‘pig!’” She grinned, clearly pleased with her own observation, “Or was it ‘a piggly problem of propriety’? No matter—it’s all hogwash, really!”

Alice laughed despite herself and was just beginning to think of other children she knew who might do well as pigs when she spotted a familiar grin hanging in the air.

With a tug on Alice’s wrist, Hattie led her out of the chaos and into the garden. The clattering, howling, and crashing faded behind them, replaced by a strange quiet that felt almost peaceful in comparison. The air was still, carrying faint floral scents that somehow seemed out of place in Wonderland’s usual absurdity.

Alice sat on a bench, exhaling sharply as she took a bite of the mushroom and offered one to Hattie so they could grow back to their regular sizes, “Does everything here have to be so loud?” she muttered, more to herself than to Hattie.

Hattie flopped down beside her with an exaggerated sigh, stretching out like she belonged there, “The noise is part of the music. You just have to find the melody.”

Alice raised an eyebrow, unconvinced, “That doesn’t make it any less exhausting.”

Hattie turned to her, her expression softening in a way that caught Alice off guard, “It’s better when you’ve got someone to share it with.” Her voice was quieter now, tinged with something gentler, almost serious.

Alice blinked, unsure how to respond. Something in the way Hattie looked at her, like she was seeing more than just the surface, sent a strange flutter through her chest. She quickly looked away, fixing her gaze on the path ahead.

Hattie stood suddenly and extended a hand, “Come now, let’s waltz to the rhythm of madness!” she declared, her grin returning with full force.

Alice hesitated but found herself reaching for Hattie’s hand, “I don’t know how to waltz,” she said, already standing, her words feeling like an excuse even to her own ears.

“Perfect!” Hattie said, pulling her closer, “Neither do I!”

“You are entirely impossible!” Alice giggled.

“The impossible is only the possible waiting to happen!” Hattie declared, spinning Alice unexpectedly but gently.

Before Alice could respond, she froze, her ears catching the faintest sound—an elegant string melody drifting through the air. She blinked, disoriented. The sound grew richer, joined by the delicate harmony of a piano. A moment later, the triumphant blare of brass swept in, bold and golden, weaving seamlessly into the growing orchestra.

“Hattie...” Alice began, her voice soft with wonder as the garden around them dissolved. The mossy paths and chattering flowers melted away, replaced by gleaming marble floors that stretched endlessly beneath their feet. Chandeliers of crystal sparkled overhead, casting glimmers of light that danced with them. The air itself shimmered, as if Wonderland had held its breath and conjured this moment just for them.

Alice looked down at herself and gasped. Her simple blue dress had transformed into a gown of starlight and moonbeams, flowing and delicate, as if made from the night sky. Hattie stood before her, radiant in a tailcoat that held the essence of the cosmos, her ever-present hat perched at a jaunty

angle. She tipped it slightly, grinning as if this shift in reality was the most natural thing in the world.

“...just waiting to happen...” Alice muttered, barely aware she’d spoken the words aloud. Her gaze moved from the grandeur around her to Hattie, whose smile softened with something more profound than her usual mischief.

Alice stepped closer, her fingers brushing Hattie’s cheek before she leaned in to rest her forehead against Hattie’s, her breath mingling with hers in the quiet intimacy of the moment.

The orchestra swelled, the violins soaring above the steady rhythm of the waltz, but Alice hardly noticed. All she saw, all she felt, was Hattie—the warmth of her touch, the steadiness of her presence. For the first time, Alice stopped questioning, stopped analyzing. She simply was.

Hattie’s hand tightened around hers, guiding her back into the dance. Together, they moved across the gleaming floor, the ballroom theirs and theirs alone. Every step, every turn, was a silent conversation, a rhythm only they could understand.

“Look there,” Hattie whispered, nudging Alice gently as the ballroom and their attire quickly dissipated, and the orchestra faded, “Your favorite feline has returned.”

Sitting on the bough of a nearby tree was the Cheshire Cat, its wide, toothy grin had appeared first, but now it was followed by the faint outline of its body. Alice stopped short, her curiosity rekindled as the Cat’s bright eyes fixed on her.

The Cheshire Cat’s grin widened the moment its gaze fell on Alice and Hattie. Its demeanor seemed good-natured enough, Alice thought, though the long claws and sharp teeth gave her pause. Best to approach with respect.

“Cheshire Puss,” Alice began hesitantly, unsure if the name would be well received. The Cat’s grin only stretched further, if that were possible, “Well, it hasn’t pounced on us yet,” she thought, taking that as a positive sign.

“Would you tell me, please,” Alice ventured, “which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a great deal on where you want to get to,” replied the Cat, its tail twitching lazily as it settled more comfortably on the branch.

“Well, that’s a statement if I ever heard one!” Hattie crossed her arms with a smile.

“I don’t much care where—” Alice began.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” the Cat interrupted.

“—so long as I get somewhere,” Alice said, frowning slightly.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat cheerfully, “if you only walk long enough.”

Beside Alice, Hattie chimed in, “I’d argue that one needn’t walk at all to get somewhere. Sometimes standing still is its own journey.”

The Cat chuckled—a strange, purring sound that made Alice unsure whether it agreed or found the comment as baffling as she did. Deciding to ignore Hattie’s remark, Alice pressed on, “What sort of people live about here?”

The Cat flicked its right paw lazily, indicating one direction, “That way lives the March Hare.” It switched to its left paw, “And that way lives... well, I suppose you’ve already found the Mad Hatter. And then there’s the Dormouse. Visit either you like—they’re all mad.”

Alice glanced at Hattie, who had dramatically placed her hand over her heart, “Mad, am I? Why, thank you, Puss, for the glowing endorsement!” She grinned at Alice, “You see? Utterly reputable.”

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice said firmly, crossing her arms.

“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat, its grin never wavering, “We’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad. She’s certainly mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad?” Alice asked, narrowing her eyes.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”

Alice huffed but said nothing. She didn’t find that reasoning particularly sound, “And how do you know that you’re mad?”

“To begin with,” said the Cat, stretching its claws as it spoke, “a dog’s not mad. You grant that?”

“I suppose so,” Alice replied.

“Well then,” the Cat continued, “a dog growls when it’s angry and wags its tail when it’s pleased. Now, I growl when I’m pleased and wag my tail when I’m angry. Therefore, I’m mad.”

“I growl when I’m angry and I wag my behind when I’m pleased!” Hattie said as she proceeded to demonstrate, “But I’m not a dog. I suppose I am also mad then.”

Alice, less amused, folded her arms, "I'd call it purring, not growling."

"Call it what you like," the Cat said, "Names don't change the thing itself."

The Cat began to fade, first its tail, then its paws, until only its grin hung in the air, "I do hope you find your way, Alice. Or don't."

With that, the grin dissolved into nothing, leaving Alice staring at the empty bough while Hattie twirled happily beside her.

"Do you think he was telling the truth?" Hattie asked.

"About him being mad?"

"No, of course he's mad! I mean about him being a cat."

"Well, certainly he's a cat! What else would he be?"

"An undercover zebra?"

Alice sighed, shaking her head, "I'm beginning to think I'll never make sense of this place."

"Sense?" Hattie said with a laugh, "Why on earth would you waste time on that?" She took Alice's hand, tugging her forward, "Come along, sweetness. Come and see my humble abode!"

Chapter 7

A Mad Tea Party

Alice and Hattie wandered through the garden until they stumbled upon a peculiar sight for one, a familiar sight for the other—a long tea table set with no regard for reason. Teapots perched precariously on teacups, saucers were stacked atop sugar bowls, and steam rose lazily from spouts, drifting into the air as if it belonged there. The whole scene looked as though disorder had been given free rein to play.

“Ah, home sweet tea!” Hattie exclaimed, throwing her arms wide, “Sit, Alice, before the clock changes its mind!”

Alice hesitated before settling into a chair. She watched the table carefully, her fingers grazing the back of the seat as if testing its stability. A teapot nearby poured its contents straight into the grass, the amber liquid pooling at her feet.

“Why is the tea spilling everywhere?” Alice asked.

“Because it’s better to share,” Hattie said.

With a sigh, Alice allowed herself to sit back and watch as the tea dribbled into the earth.

At the far end of the table, the March Hare bounced erratically in his chair, waving a spoon above his head like a scepter, “Behold! The scepter of spoondom!” Whatever he meant by that was lost as his thoughts escaped him midsentence.

Meanwhile, the Dormouse slept soundly in the curve of a teapot, her tiny whiskers twitching as she muttered dreamily, “And the tulips... they danced...” before falling silent again.

Alice observed it all, her teacup steady in her hands. “Curiouser and curiouser,” she whispered to herself, her words barely audible over the clinking of porcelain.

Hattie leaned closer, her grin softening as she spoke, “It’s better to revel in it, Alice. Wonderland isn’t for understanding—it’s for feeling.”

Alice turned to Hattie, who reached for a teacup, its contents sloshing dangerously, and offered it to Alice, “Shall we toast to the impossible?”

The corners of Alice’s lips lifted despite her best efforts to stay composed, “You are entirely impossible,” she said, shaking her head as a quiet laugh escaped her.

“Precisely!” Hattie replied, raising her cup high.

Alice let herself laugh, the sound blending with the madness of the tea party and the company of the one person who made it all feel strangely, wonderfully right.

“Tell me, Alice,” Hattie began, spinning a sugar cube between her fingers, “if it’s always tea time, are we ever late? Or is time late for us?”

Alice opened her mouth to respond, but the March Hare interrupted with a dramatic leap from his chair, spoon raised high, “Time is a guest who forgot to RSVP!”

Hattie laughed, clapping her hands. The sugar cube fell from her grasp and disappeared into her teacup, spilling tea over the edge and onto the grass below.

“Perhaps time is just a guest at the party,” Alice offered hesitantly.

Hattie grinned, “And what a fickle guest it is—never on time, and always overstaying its welcome.”

“Surely time must follow rules,” Alice insisted, knowing very well that she was never going to get the answers she was hoping for, but she began to enjoy the madness. She watched a pocket watch dangling from a teapot spout tick backward, “Appointments, schedules—those are important.”

Hattie stood abruptly, balancing on the edge of her chair with her arms spread wide, “To eternally late arrivals! May they always find a seat!”

Alice giggled.

“To Alice!” Hattie announced suddenly, lifting her teacup high, “Queen of Logic! May she always be baffled by brilliance!”

The Dormouse stirred in her teapot, mumbling something incoherent, while tea cascaded from the spout. Alice watched the scene, torn between amusement and disbelief. Finally, she raised her own cup.

“To brilliance... and bafflement.” Her words were met with cheers and clinking porcelain.

In the chaos, Alice felt a spark of something unfamiliar but freeing. Here, where rules didn’t matter and madness reigned, she let herself laugh. As she sipped her tea, it occurred to her that understanding might not be the point. Perhaps embracing the absurd was enough.

Alice’s gaze drifted to Hattie, who had grown uncharacteristically quiet. She wasn’t grinning or gesturing wildly but looking at Alice with a stillness that felt out of place in the mayhem of the tea party. Her smile was softer now, almost tender, and her eyes held an intensity that made Alice’s heart beat a bit faster. For a moment, the noise of Wonderland faded, leaving only the two of them.

Alice felt something shift inside her, like a door opening to a part of herself she didn’t recognize. Her chest tightened, not with fear but with something softer, something warmer. Hattie’s gaze didn’t demand anything; it simply asked, gently and without words, for Alice to see her.

The moment stretched between them, quiet and full, until Hattie’s grin returned, breaking the spell. She leaped to her feet, her energy bubbling back, “Another toast!” she announced, plucking a piece of toast from somewhere unseen and smearing it with butter in one grand sweep. Holding it aloft like a prized trophy, she declared, “To fleeting moments! May they linger forever as they quickly dissipate!!”

Alice let out a laugh. She raised her cup, joining in the cheer, “To fleeting moments!”

As the tea party whirled back into its nonsensical rhythm, Alice found herself clinging to the memory of Hattie’s earlier look. It stayed with her, even later, as the March Hare and Dormouse sent her off with gifts of saucers and slurred farewells.

Hattie skipped up beside her, clapping her hands with joy, “Your first tea party! You handled it beautifully, my dear. I’m so proud!”

“This is hardly my first tea party, Hattie,” Alice said with a soft laugh.

“But it’s your first *mad* tea party!”

Alice giggled, “I can’t argue with that.”

“Come!” Hattie exclaimed, grabbing Alice’s hand and pulling her forward with the energy of a child unveiling a secret, “You must see my house!”

They left the tea party behind, the path beneath their feet a patchwork of grass and flowers. Wonderland around them morphed as they walked—trees whispered as if sharing secrets, and the sky shifted into colors that defied description. Hattie led with purpose, though Alice wasn’t entirely sure what direction they were going in or if it mattered at all.

The chaotic world around them reflected the growing whirl of thoughts in Alice’s mind. She stole a glance at Hattie, who hummed a nonsensical tune under her breath. There was that flutter in her chest again, a feeling that left her warm and unsteady all at once.

Hattie cut through Alice’s thoughts, “Tea parties are like life—messy, confusing, and best shared with someone unexpected.”

Alice smiled shyly. The annoyance she’d felt initially melted away completely, replaced by a lightness she couldn’t quite explain. Hattie’s chaos, which had once felt overwhelming, now seemed oddly comforting—like a breath of fresh air after a stifling room.

Alice’s steps grew lighter, her heart finding a rhythm that didn’t follow the strict tempo of her old life. Walking beside Hattie, she felt something unraveling inside her.

Alice’s feet barely crossed the threshold when her world seemed to flip upside down—literally. Hattie’s house was unlike anything she’d ever seen, its furnishings dangling from the ceiling as though gravity had simply given up. Chairs hung like bats, chandeliers rooted themselves in the floor, and artwork turned the wrong way round.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Alice murmured, stepping cautiously.

The fireplace cast its warmth upward, and books clung to their shelves in defiance of reason. Teacups sat poised at impossible angles, their liquid mysteriously contained.

“Isn’t it simply head over heels?” Hattie said with glee, spinning in place.

“It’s like stepping into a reflection,” Alice replied, her voice tinged with wonder. She reached out to touch a mirror, half-expecting it to ripple like water, unsure if she was the one upside down.

Alice wandered further, taking in the peculiarities. A grandfather clock swung its pendulum lazily in reverse, and bats dozed peacefully on what should have been the floor, “Where does one sleep in a place like this?” she asked aloud.

“On the bed, of course!” Hattie said, leading her to a room where a bed clung to the ceiling, its pillows plump and inviting.

Alice tilted her head, “Don’t you fall off?”

“No more than anyone else,” Hattie replied.

The whimsical nature of it all tugged a smile from Alice.

Hattie grabbed Alice’s hand and pulled her upwards, toward the bed. With a leap, they landed gently on the mattress as the room righted itself in one seamless motion. The bed was soft, the quilt warm, and the moment strangely still.

Alice stretched out beside Hattie, her gaze drifting over the room, “My room back home is always so tidy. Everything in its place, nothing out of order.”

“And does it feel like home?” Hattie asked, her voice quieter, her brown eyes searching the other girl’s face.

Alice hesitated, “No. It feels more like a museum—perfect to look at but cold to live in.”

Hattie gestured at the colorful mess around them, “Here, every touch leaves a story. A room should be lived in, loved in, laughed in.”

Alice smiled at the sentiment. The disarray of the room wasn’t just disorder—it was life, “Your room feels like a part of you. Warm and full of character.”

“Exactly! That’s the beauty of madness. It’s where the heart beats strongest.”

Alice traced the quilt beneath her fingers. The air was filled with lavender and something untamed, like the forest after rain. Hattie strummed a miniature ukulele that she had pulled from nowhere.

“Life,” Hattie began, her voice a playful melody, “isn’t about finding the right answers. It’s about asking the right questions.”

“And what are those?” Alice asked, her gaze fixed on the swirls of the fabric.

“The ones that make your heart do cartwheels and your head spin. The ones that lead you down rabbit holes.”

“Rabbit holes can be frightening.”

“Only if you’re afraid of getting lost. But what if getting lost is how you find yourself?”

Alice pondered this, the words wrapping around her thoughts like ivy, “I used to think everything needed a place, a purpose. Now, I’m not so sure.”

“I hear that certainty is for clocks and train schedules,” Hattie said, setting aside the pocket-size ukulele, “but not for hearts and dreams.”

“And what is for hearts and dreams?”

“Madness,” Hattie declared, spreading her arms wide, “Utter, delightful madness.”

Without thinking, Alice leaned forward and pressed her lips to Hattie’s. The kiss was soft and fleeting, like a butterfly brushing against her skin, but it carried the weight of all the moments that had brought them here.

Hattie stilled with eyes wide open, then melted into the kiss, her own warmth meeting Alice’s.

Alice pulled back, her cheeks aflame as reality settled in. The room, once spinning with the whims of Wonderland, now felt achingly still, a stark contrast to the storm of emotions within her.

“Oh dear,” Alice whispered, her voice trembling, “What have I done?”

Hattie tilted her head, her expression one of curious amusement, “That was quite the kiss, Miss Logic.”

“I—I don’t know what came over me. I’m so sorry, Hattie,” Alice stammered, her hands clasped tightly as if to steady herself.

“Sorry?” Hattie said, her grin widening, “In Wonderland, apologies are about as useful as trying to paint the wind.”

Alice blinked, unsure how to respond. Her thoughts tumbled, but Hattie’s laughter softened the moment.

“Maybe it wasn’t madness or magic. Maybe it was just Alice being Alice—curious enough to follow a rabbit, bold enough to drink from a mystery bottle, and now, brave enough to taste the unknown.”

Alice let the words settle, her heart steadying, “Bravery feels odd on me, like a dress stitched together from mismatched pieces.”

“It suits you,” Hattie said, her voice softer now, “It flows with every step you take into wonder.”

Alice smiled, small but genuine, as she wrung her fingers, “Perhaps it’s not bravery, but a desire to see how the story unfolds.”

“Stories are best when they surprise you—like tea parties with mad hatters or kisses that bloom out of nowhere.”

“Unexpected,” Alice agreed, letting her smile grow.

Hattie’s fingers traced the brim of her hat, and then she set it on the ground, tilting it slightly as though it, too, were watching the moment unfold.

“Feelings, my darling Alice, are the wildest of creatures. To cage them is to deny their purpose.” She paused, “And love—well, love is the maddest of all.”

Alice felt her heart flutter. Her thoughts, usually so precise, swirled with the possibility of what Hattie meant, of what she might mean to her.

“May I show you?” Hattie asked, stepping closer.

Alice nodded, a small, scared, but resolute motion that carried her entire being forward. Her breath caught as Hattie smiled, closing the space between them with a quiet confidence.

“Let’s lay with the madness,” Hattie whispered, her voice a gentle thread binding them in that moment.

Their lips met softly, tentatively. The kiss was light, a question more than an answer, a touch filled with curiosity and wonder.

Hattie leaned into Alice, her presence warm and steady as the kiss deepened. The hesitance melted away, replaced by something freer, unspoken but deeply felt. Alice let out a small sound of surprise—half whimper, half sigh—as the weight of the moment settled over her.

They sank onto the bed, the descent slow and unhurried, as if the world had decided to move at their pace. For Alice, the strict lines of her reality blurred, softened into something vibrant and alive. The logic and structure she had always clung to dissolved into Hattie’s laughter, her touch, her impossible, wonderful presence.

Alice trembled under Hattie’s touch. The Mad Hatter deepened the kiss and Alice whimpered—a sound delicate yet laced with awakening desire.

Fingers began their tender exploration across skin and fabric. Alice felt the tremor of Hattie’s touch tracing her collarbone, skimming with a

reverence that spoke volumes more than words. The tentative boundaries, once so stark, blurred beneath the warmth of questing hands.

Hattie's gaze lingered on Alice, eyes alight with questions that hung in the charged air between them. With each silent inquiry, her fingers ventured further, daring to dip beneath the hemlines and seams that guarded Alice's hidden contours. The world held its breath as Alice, caught in the gravity of Hattie's stare, offered the faintest nod.

The kiss that followed was a gentle promise made of tenderness and time. Hattie's lips moved with patience, lingering on Alice's with a quiet intensity. As she undressed the blonde, her hands were delicate, easing away each barrier with a touch that whispered against the skin. She unveiled Alice like a treasured piece of art, revealing beauty not to be possessed, but admired.

When Hattie's hands cradled her breasts, it was with worshipful adoration. Each caress, every glide of her thumb celebrated the lushness before her. Alice, beneath the spell of Hattie's reverent touch, unfolded like a flower.

Hattie's fingers gently guided Alice's hands to the edges of her tailored tailcoat. It was a gesture that held within it an offering of power, a tender shift in their dance of trust and shared explorations.

"Your turn," Hattie's voice was a soft murmur, a playful nudge in the quiet room.

With trembling fingers, Alice began to undo the buttons. She peeled back the layers, her movements growing bolder as Hattie's tailcoat slipped from her shoulders and fell away. Soon, the rest of their clothes followed.

In the newfound vulnerability of their nakedness, there was no place for anything but the truth of skin and soul. Hattie settled herself on her ankles between the inviting valley of Alice's thighs.

She leaned forward, lips brushing against the softness of Alice's inner thigh. A second kiss followed on the other leg, leaving a trail of warmth that promised more. The sound that escaped Alice—a primal grunt—was like the turning of a key in a lock never explored.

Hattie hovered with her gaze tracing the outline of Alice's form.

"You smell like moonlight dipped in marmalade," Hattie murmured, leaning in closer.

"Sweet and soft, with just a hint of mischief—like the way starlight would taste if it had a sense of humor." Her voice was low.

Alice lay beneath her, her breath hitched in her throat as the words settled over her skin. She could feel the weight of Hattie's gaze, heavy with adoration.

Hattie's fingers traced a delicate path along Alice's folds, drawing out a sharp intake of breath from lips that had never known feelings like these.

Hattie lowered herself and her mouth sought the sanctity of Alice's flesh, bestowing upon it nibbles, licks, and suckles. Beneath the warmth of her attention, Alice writhed, her body singing hymns of pleasure that crescendoed into an exquisite release.

Before the echoes of Alice's climax could fade, Hattie shifted her position. She rose onto all fours, climbed over Alice, and gently replaced the ministrations of her mouth with the deft play of her fingers.

Alice, caught in the liminal space between oversensitivity and an insatiable desire, arched beneath Hattie's touch. There was a dance to their movements now, a choreography that belonged to them alone.

Hattie's finger traced the delicate contours of Alice's desire, pressing knuckle-deep into the warm embrace. Uncertainty flickered across Alice's features, a vulnerability that called forth patience from Hattie's practiced touch. The Mad Hatter watched, breath bated, as Alice's eyes fluttered—adjusting and accepting before the second finger joined the first.

Their lips met again in shared breaths. The kiss was a whisper, a seal over the unspoken vows of this newly discovered closeness. And as Alice began to undulate—hips grinding against Hattie's probing fingers—the tempo of their union quickened.

With precision, Hattie increased the pace. Her fingers wove through Alice's arousal, pulling threads of passion tighter until they quivered on the brink of unraveling. And when the climax came, it was like watching a revelation painted in hues of ecstasy across Alice's visage.

In the aftermath, they lingered within the embrace of shared discovery, two souls entwined by the delicacy of newfound intimacy.

Alice's breath came in uneven waves, the storm of passion subsiding to leave her adrift in a sea of calm. Hattie's lips, soft and deliberate, pressed gentle kisses along Alice's flushed face, trailing reverent paths down the curve of her chest. Each kiss felt like a quiet affirmation onto skin still trembling with the aftershocks of bliss.

"You make me feel like a kite in a hurricane," Alice whispered, "Somehow flying instead of falling."

The taller woman gave a smile that softened her sharp features, her eyes crinkling at the corners.

Hattie's fingers stilled as the room quieted, the echoes of racing breaths softening into a tranquil rhythm. Her gaze lingered on Alice, her chest rising and falling. Hattie's eyes traced the contours of Alice's face, noting every line and shadow etched by laughter, thought, and the gentle light of the bedside lamp.

"Are you getting there, sweetheart? Are you starting to let yourself just be?"

Alice's eyelids fluttered open, deep with unspoken emotions. She lay adrift in sensation, her spirit buoyant in the aftermath of their shared storm, "I'm not sure where I'm getting to. But I know I'd like to bring you along—and return the favor."

Chapter 8

The Queen's Croquet Ground

The air carried a curious scent of mischief and roses as Alice and Hattie wandered into a garden. The days since their last great adventure—and the night when their closeness shifted into something sweeter—had been both a whirlwind and a comfort. They had fallen into an easy rhythm between Hattie's playful chaos and Alice's grounding curiosity.

Alice walked a step ahead, her hand grazing over the edges of velvety petals as she stole glances at Hattie. The Mad Hatter twirled a daisy between her fingers, humming an off-key tune that mimicked the strange birds fluttering above them. But there was something new in Hattie's gaze when their eyes met—softer, warmer.

“Do you think flowers ever get tired of being pretty?”

Alice chuckled, brushing her shoulder against Hattie's as they walked, “If they're anything like you, I doubt they notice.”

Hattie gasped with mock outrage, clutching her hat to her chest, “Me? Not notice my charms? Sweetness, you wound me!”

Alice rolled her eyes, but her smile betrayed her, “Let's just say you're... admirably oblivious.”

They turned a corner, and the sight before them made Alice pause. A group of card gardeners moved with frantic energy, their spades and brushes flying as they painted white roses a hasty crimson. The air buzzed with the

sounds of their panic, and Alice tilted her head, watching the scene unfold with an amused quirk of her lips.

“Well, this is a proper spectacle,” Hattie said, her fingers intertwining with Alice’s, “Shall we investigate, my curious companion? Or perhaps we should join the artistry?”

Alice glanced at Hattie’s grin, her heart lightened by the sheer joy in the woman’s voice, “Let’s investigate,” she replied, giving Hattie’s hand a playful squeeze, “But no meddling this time.”

“Meddling?” Hattie scoffed, “Why, my dear Alice, I am the picture of restraint!”

“What are they doing?”

“Improvising. In this realm, sweetness, one must match the Queen’s palette—or risk losing their heads.”

The gardeners froze, their painted roses forgotten as silence fell over the garden like a fragile shroud.

The procession arrived with the stentorian precision of a clockwork parade. Card soldiers with painted faces marched in rigid formation. The White Rabbit scurried behind, pocket watch clutched tightly, his anxiety visible in every darting glance.

Then came the Queen of Hearts—a storm of regal authority. Her billowing crimson gown swallowed the light, and her crown perched like a symbol of absolute dominion. The air thickened as she passed, her presence commanding every gaze.

“Ah, Hattie,” the Queen’s voice, smooth as silk yet edged with steel, broke the silence. Her sharp eyes lingered on the charming gangly woman, softening for a fleeting moment, “Still delightfully mad, I see.”

Hattie curtsied deeply, her top hat nearly brushing the grass, “Only as mad as the world permits, Your Majesty.”

Alice felt strangely uneasy.

“Though I must confess, I’m madder about certain things than others.” Her gaze flicked briefly to Alice.

The Queen’s soft expression darkened, a shadow creeping over her regal features. The air grew heavy, tension coiling like a spring.

“And who is *this*?” she asked, her words cutting through the moment like ice. Her piercing gaze settled on Alice, who suddenly felt both exposed and magnified under such scrutiny.

Alice stepped forward. With measured grace, she offered a curtsy, “My name is Alice, Your Majesty.”

The Queen’s sharp eyes raked over her, dissecting every detail with the precision of a blade, “A curious creature indeed. Do you play croquet, Alice?”

Alice felt the weight of the question, the garden transforming into a stage for the game. She nodded nervously.

The Queen’s voice rang sharp and commanding, “Let the game commence!” At once, the court erupted into motion, a whirlwind of absurdity wrapped in regal pomp. Flamingos were plucked from their preening and handed out as mallets, their long necks gripped firmly by eager players.

Curled into reluctant balls, hedgehogs were set upon the uneven lawn, their tiny faces peeking out in resigned dismay. Card soldiers bent and folded themselves into arches, their painted expressions blank under the Queen’s watchful gaze.

Hattie accepted her flamingo, “Finally, a weapon worthy of Wonderland’s battlefield of nonsense!” She swung it experimentally, the flamingo appearing almost complicit, its head held high in defiance.

The bird in Alice’s hands was far less cooperative, twisting and glaring as though offended by its role. Nearby, her assigned hedgehog seized the moment, scuttling away with surprising speed across the tufts of grass.

“Drat,” Alice muttered, crouching low to coax the flamingo into compliance, “We’re on the same side, you know.” But the bird only twisted its neck into a questioning loop, clearly unconvinced.

The Queen, observing the scene from her throne, sneered. Her voice, dripping with disdain, cut through the garden, “Pathetic. Perhaps croquet is too complex for some.”

Alice straightened, her cheeks still warm from the Queen’s scorn. She met the Queen’s gaze steadily, “Complex, Your Majesty? Perhaps. But I find that even the most tangled of games can be won with wit and patience—qualities I doubt are taught on a throne.”

Hattie, meanwhile, danced through the game with effortless charm, her flamingo swishing gracefully as it struck a hedgehog through a card-arch wicket, “Bravo!” she called to Alice, “You’re doing splendidly, my love. The hedgehogs just don’t know it yet.”

From her throne, the Queen's eyes narrowed, jealousy simmering beneath her regal composure.

"Such charm," the Queen said with disdain. Her courtiers felt the shift in her mood, their movements growing more subdued as the storm brewed in her glare.

Amid the pandemonium of writhing flamingos and fleeing hedgehogs, a disembodied grin appeared above the Queen's throne, followed by the languid form of the Cheshire Cat. It hovered in the air, lounging invisibly as though upon a chaise longue.

"Having fun, Alice?" it purred.

Alice smirked, "It's... an unusual game."

"Unusual, indeed," the Cat chuckled, its grin widening, "Though the Queen's croquet is less about playing and more about beheading."

The words sent a shiver through Alice.

The Queen's scream shattered the air, "Off with its head!" she bellowed, her fury directed at the Cheshire Cat. Guards scrambled in confusion as the Cat's laugh echoed overhead.

"You'll have to catch me first, Your Majesty," it taunted.

The air around the Queen was thick with her vexation, a suffocating mist that clung to the garden like a storm cloud on the verge of breaking. Soldiers dashed across the emerald grass in every direction, their movements a discordant rhythm as they chased the grinning specter of the Cheshire Cat. The Queen's fiery gaze settled on Alice, pinning her to the ground with its intensity.

"You've disrupted my game long enough!" the Queen spat, "Perhaps you'd be better suited to the dungeons."

Alice felt Hattie's presence beside her. The rapid drumbeat of her heart echoed with courage as she straightened her posture, "I've done nothing wrong, Your Majesty. And if this is how you play, I'd rather not play at all."

The Queen's expression hardened, her anger emanating like smoke from a fire stoked too high.

Hattie stepped forward with a disarming ease, her usual mischief replaced by a measured calm. She positioned herself between Alice and the Queen, "Now, now, Your Majesty. A little jealousy can be charming, but threats? Those are unbecoming of a ruler as magnificent as you."

The Queen's regal posture faltered ever so slightly, her features all pride and uncertainty, "Jealous?" she repeated, the word dripping with disbelief as her lips curled into a sneer, "Of this... child?" She spat the last word as though it carried a bitter taste, "Don't be absurd!"

Alice stood motionless as the Queen's mask of outrage slipped. For a fleeting moment, her fury gave way to something unexpected—a crack in her armor, a flicker of doubt. There was a vulnerability in her hesitation, a humanity that Alice found both startling and oddly compelling.

The garden, with its painted roses and card-like courtiers, held its collective breath. The soldiers froze mid-step, the hedgehogs stopped their scuttling, and even the breeze stilled, as if Wonderland itself awaited the Queen's next move.

Then, like a burst of lightning through a storm cloud, the Cheshire Cat reappeared, its grin more mischievous than ever.

"Isn't it fascinating," the Cat purred, materializing above the Queen's throne, "how chaos has a way of settling just enough to make room for more?"

The Queen's composure cracked as she let out a frustrated growl, her gaze snapping to the grinning specter, "Off with its head!" The guards scrambled, their earlier confusion returning tenfold as they tried to obey.

"Ah, but Your Majesty," the Cat teased, "can you remove what floats so freely?" It winked at Alice before fading into thin air again.

As the Queen turned her wrath toward her hapless courtiers, a ripple of nervous energy swept through the gathered crowd. The executioner and a fidgeting vizier were already engaged in a heated argument near the Queen's dais. Their voices rose in overlapping waves, each speaking louder as if sheer volume might settle their dispute.

"Now what?" Alice muttered under her breath. Hattie, ever calm, gave her a wry smile, "Looks like you're about to be drafted as the voice of reason."

Sure enough, the Queen caught sight of Alice and beckoned her forward with an imperious wave, "You there, girl! Settle this ridiculous debate before I have the lot of them executed!"

With no other choice, Alice stepped forward into the fray. The executioner gestured wildly as he insisted, "One cannot cut off a head where there is no body! It's simply impossible, and I'm not about to ruin my reputation trying!"

“Nonsense!” snapped the vizier, puffing up his chest, “If it has a head, it can be beheaded, and I won’t hear another word to the contrary!”

The Queen’s fury boiled over, “Enough delays! If this isn’t resolved immediately, I’ll have every last one of you executed!”

Alice felt her cheeks flush. Searching for a response, she blurted out, “The cat belongs to the Duchess! Perhaps you should ask her about it.”

The Queen’s expression shifted, her brows knitting in a stormy glare, “The Duchess? She’s in prison! Girl, you go fetch her at once!”

The Cheshire Cat’s grinning face began to fade.

The vizier tripped over his own robes, sending a croquet ball careening into a courtier’s foot, prompting a yelp that echoed across the lawn. The executioner spun wildly in circles, his axe catching the sunlight as he swatted futilely at an invisible foe. A woman shrieked as a flamingo darted out of her grasp, flapping wildly into the air. Courtiers ducked and scattered, some diving behind hedges for cover, while others attempted to salvage their dignity by pretending to focus on the croquet game.

Alice exhaled deeply, glancing at Hattie, who was just positively thrilled.

“Quite the show,” Hattie murmured, sliding her arm through Alice’s, “Shall we find the Dutchess and leave them to their folly?”

Together, they melted back into the crowd, the Queen’s ranting fading into the distance.

Chapter 9

The Mock Turtle's Story

Hattie and Alice managed to escort the Dutchess from the dungeons and then onto the garden's winding paths that led to the game of croquet, guards on either side of her. She was mid-tirade, her bonnet askew as though her fervent moralizing had outpaced her ability to keep tidy.

"Consider my words," the Dutchess declared, brandishing a finger like a preacher's staff, "To be angry is to revenge the faults of others on oneself."

Hattie tilted her head, "But dearest Dutchess, doesn't that mean your anger at us is nothing more than a tragic romance with your own reflection?"

A giggle escaped Alice before she could stop it. She clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Preposterous!" the Dutchess huffed, her cheeks puffing indignantly, "One must be serious in matters of consequence!"

"But what if consequence itself isn't serious?" Hattie countered, twirling an imaginary mustache, "Take a mouse who believes himself a man. Is he consequential because of his delusion or inconsequential due to his size?"

The Dutchess opened her mouth to retort but faltered, her brows knitting tightly.

Alice glanced ahead and froze. There, at the bend of the path, stood the Queen, her arms crossed, a frown etched so deeply into her face that it darkened the very air around her.

“A fine day, Your Majesty!” the Duchess ventured, her voice suddenly meek, the indignation in her tone vanishing quickly.

The Queen’s foot came down with a thunderous stamp, “I give you fair warning! Either you or your head must be off—and that in less than no time! Take your choice!”

The Duchess’s eyes widened, and without another word, she darted off into the hedges, the guards trailing after her in befuddled pursuit.

“What a dramatic exit!” Hattie said, “Do you think she’ll write a memoir about it?”

“This had nothing to do with the Cheshire Cat,” Alice said.

“What cat?” Hattie asked, and Alice looked at her incredulously.

“Let’s go on with the game,” the Queen commanded sharply, her gaze boring into Alice. Too intimidated to refuse, Alice nodded and followed her back toward the croquet ground, with Hattie skipping beside her as if this were all a perfectly ordinary stroll.

The other guests, who had been lounging in the shade during the Queen’s absence, scrambled to their feet and rushed back to the croquet field. The Queen swept onto the lawn, barking at them sharply, “A moment’s delay, and it’s off with your heads!”

As the game resumed, chaos quickly took hold. The Queen shouted “Off with her head!” or “Off with his head!” at nearly everyone in turn. Each sentenced player was escorted away by soldiers, who abandoned their roles as arches to fulfill their duties, leaving fewer and fewer arches on the field. By the time half an hour had passed, only the Queen, the vizier, Alice, and Hattie remained unscathed, while the rest of the players stood under guard awaiting their executions.

“Do you think I could bribe an arch to return? This is the worst croquet set I’ve ever seen,” Hattie said.

At last, the Queen, quite breathless, lowered her mallet and turned to Alice, “Have you seen the Mock Turtle yet?” she asked abruptly.

“No,” Alice replied, startled, “I don’t even know what a Mock Turtle is.”

“It’s the creature Mock Turtle Soup is made from,” the Queen declared, as if this were the most natural explanation in the world.

“I’ve never seen one or even heard of one.”

“Come on, then,” said the Queen, “and he shall tell you his history.” Without waiting for a reply, she strode off toward a nearby path, her mallet tucked under her arm.

“I never understand what goes on around here,” Alice said, “People start and end conversations whenever they wish. They come and go without any sense or purpose. What was the point of the Cheshire Cat appearing? And bringing the Dutchess here? And now making me see the Mock Turtle?”

Hattie just shrugged. “But why do you want sense and purpose?”

“I know this place is mad, Hattie, but there should be at least some order to the madness.”

“Order to the madness, you say? Oh, sweetness, that’s like asking for a neatly folded thunderstorm or a well-behaved teacup. Where’s the fun in that? Besides, if things made sense, we’d have to start paying taxes on imagination—and who wants that?”

Alice blinked, momentarily thrown off by the absurdity. “Taxes on... imagination?” she repeated, half-laughing.

“Exactly. Before you know it, the Queen would demand a ledger of every daydream and a receipt for every whimsy. Utterly dreadful, don’t you think?”

Alice shook her head. “You’re impossible.”

“I prefer the term ‘delightfully impractical,’” Hattie replied with a grin.

As Alice and Hattie walked away from the scene, Alice overheard the vizier muttering to the remaining players, “You are all pardoned.”

Hattie, walking beside her, tilted her head toward Alice, “I hope the Mock Turtle is as interesting as his soup. Though, between us, I’ve never trusted a soup that mocks itself.”

Alice, still laughing softly, turned to Hattie with a warm sense of gratitude as she took the other woman’s extended arm. The touch was reassuring, protective. Together, they walked on, their synchronized steps weaving a quiet bond, each glance exchanged carrying unspoken understanding.

Their path twisted, flanked by trees whose branches arched like the backs of stretching cats. Alice’s thoughts wandered, drawn by the strange comfort of Hattie’s presence.

“I can feel the wheels turning inside your brains,” Hattie said, “Or maybe it’s you who are turning around the wheels.”

Alice chuckled, “Back home, there’s an order to things. Everyone has their pattern to follow, their rules to obey.”

Hattie raised a curious brow.

“But those rules feel like a cage,” Alice admitted, her fingers tightening on Hattie’s sleeve, “Here, I’m awash in wonder, but there...” She paused, her words trembling, “There, I must be ‘normal,’ whatever that means.”

Hattie feigned a shudder, “How dreadfully dull. Normalcy is just a cage made of rules someone else wrote.”

Alice let out a soft laugh, “And yet I fear returning to it. Especially now, after Wonderland, after...” Her voice dipped to a near-whisper, “After meeting you.”

Hattie’s hand tightened around Alice’s arm, her gaze warm and knowing, “You needn’t fear. Here, madness is freedom painted in vibrant colors. And you, my dear, are the loveliest stroke upon the canvas.”

A breeze ruffled through the trees, carrying with it the peculiar tang of the local flora. Hattie twirled, “Insanity is freedom with a splash of color! Like a dance that never ends, joyous simply because it exists.”

Alice watched, her heart swelling with a curious mixture of relief and revelation. Here was someone who not only embraced chaos but made it beautiful. Hattie’s exuberance, her philosophy, felt like an echo of Alice’s own hidden desires—a manifesto for daring to break free.

“Once,” Hattie said, her voice quieter now, “I lived in a world that stifled imagination. They called me mad.” Her lips curved into a bittersweet smile, “They were right. And so was I. Madness...” Hattie plucked a vibrant wildflower and held it out to Alice, “needn’t be a dirge. It can be joy if you claim it. Like plucking a rose from the thorns—it stings, but oh, the fragrance is worth it.”

Alice took the flower, her fingers brushing Hattie’s. The word *joy* lingered on her lips, its sweetness illuminating the path ahead like sunlight breaking through clouds.

Hattie twirled. The sun was now a languid observer in the late afternoon sky. She stopped abruptly, facing Alice.

“Let’s play a game.”

Alice raised an eyebrow, “What kind of game?”

“A game of secrets. We each share something we’ve never told another soul.”

Alice hesitated, her heart fluttering. But Hattie’s smile seemed too inviting and trusting to refuse.

“Very well,” Alice said.

“Splendid!” Hattie clapped her hands, “I’ll go first, to show there’s nothing to fear.”

She leaned in conspiratorially, “I’ve always despised the color beige. It’s the hue of boredom—a sin worse than any other.”

Alice laughed, a bright, untethered sound. Hattie’s confession, so absurd and so perfectly her, was a gentle nudge toward vulnerability, “Now you,” Hattie prompted.

Drawing a deep breath, Alice allowed her thoughts to take form, “Sometimes I imagine a world where I can shape everything as I please. A place where I am its architect, free from rules I never agreed to.”

Hattie’s expression softened into something almost reverent, “Ah, to be queen of your own realm. A beautiful secret indeed.”

They continued their game, secrets unfolding like the petals of an enchanted rose. They found a knoll and sat upon it side by side, the world around them tilted slightly, as if it leaned in to hear their whispered truths.

Alice plucked at the grass, each blade a sharp reminder of the constraints that waited beyond Wonderland, “I’ve often thought that perhaps I wasn’t meant to be born at all.”

Hattie’s playful expression stilled, her eyes filled with quiet understanding, “Oh?”

“Everything back home is too small—not the houses or the people, but the thoughts, the dreams.” Alice’s voice trembled as she met Hattie’s gaze, “It’s like wearing a dress clipped too tightly, suffocating me slowly.”

Hattie reached for Alice’s hand, her touch feather-light yet grounding, “We’re not meant for cages, you and I,” she said softly.

Alice exhaled, a smile ghosting her lips, and Hattie tipped her head back to the sky, “Speaking of cages,” Hattie began, “do you know my greatest fear? It’s abandonment. People always leave when the tea gets cold, don’t they?”

Her laugh was light, but Alice caught the shadow behind it. Alice squeezed Hattie’s hand, “Then we’ll always keep the tea hot.”

A hush draped over them like a velvet curtain, and in that stillness, Hattie turned to Alice. Her movements were deliberate, the mischief in her eyes giving way to a rare tenderness. She reached out, her fingers brushing a stray lock of hair from Alice's brow before they came to rest upon the warmth of her cheek.

"Let's promise never to be normal, you and me," Hattie said.

Alice could feel the words settle in her chest, resonant and true. It was a vow that spoke not of binding oaths but of liberation. There was sincerity in Hattie's gaze—a depth that Alice had only glimpsed in fleeting moments, now laid bare in the tranquility of their seclusion.

"Normal," Alice echoed, tasting the word on her tongue as if it were foreign, "Yes, let's not be that."

The corner of Hattie's mouth quirked upward in a smile that held both the joy of shared secrets and the pain of past isolation. In the wistful curve of her lips, Alice read stories untold, of laughter in the face of adversity and the courage to be unapologetically oneself.

"Never normal," Alice affirmed, her heart swelling with kinship and rebellion.

Hattie leaned in, her lips brushing Alice's with the gentleness of a butterfly's wings. The kiss deepened, slow and deliberate, pulling Alice into a space where time and logic unraveled. The warmth of Hattie's touch, the soft press of her lips, the gentle rhythm of their breaths—it all stirred Alice's insides and nudged emotions Alice hadn't dared to imagine.

Their clothes became whispers of fabric on the ground, discarded like the nonsensical rules of a game they no longer wished to play. In their absence, skin touched skin. Hattie guided Alice onto the softness of the grass, its blades tickling like gentle secrets against her back.

Alice lay supine, the openness of the sky above mirrored in the vulnerability of her spread legs. Hattie aligned her core with Alice's in a way that was both audacious and tender. Their bodies joined, creating a delicious friction, each motion of heat and pleasure escalating through the quietude.

Gasps escaped their lips, mingling in the air—a duet of acute delight. Sounds of their unity, provocative and unrestrained, echoed in the enclave of their seclusion, a testament to the freedom they had found in each other's company. It was madness, perhaps, but it was their madness, vibrant and alive with the hues of joy they had promised to paint their lives with.

“Hattie,” Alice groaned, as if uttering her name would convey every single thought going through her mind.

Wonderland itself leaned in, its eccentric heartbeat synchronizing with the tempo of their grinding. As they moved together, the constraints of “normal” fell away, leaving behind only the purity of connection, the truth of their shared laughter echoing across the croquet grounds, and the certainty that in this place they had discovered something utterly real.

The world contracted to a single point of ecstatic sensation for Alice. Her release approached as she arched beneath Hattie, a silent cry etched upon her lips.

“Ah, there,” Hattie whispered. She rode the waves of Alice’s climax, prolonging the sensation for the blonde for as long as she could.

Then, the shift—a subtle realignment as Hattie sought her own zenith. Her movements became more fervent and Alice reached out to touch Hattie’s core and help increase the sensations. Alice could see Hattie feeling the now familiar coil in her lower abdomen.

A shudder ran through the Mad Hatter heralding the arrival of her own climax.

With the last echo of ecstasy, Hattie collapsed atop Alice, a tangle of limbs and satisfaction. Their breaths came in ragged tandem, wild and untamed as the winds that chased through the meadows beyond.

They caressed each other as their breathing slowed.

Laughter bubbled up from the depths of their entwined forms, breaking the silence with sudden bursts.

Hattie held Alice close against her chest and the blonde’s eyes grew wearier with each caress of Hattie’s hand against her skin until, finally, she fell asleep.

The area hummed with a serene quiet, broken only by the soft, rhythmic breaths of Hattie beside her. Alice stirred awake, the remnants of sleep tugging gently at her limbs. For a fleeting moment, a deep warmth swelled in her chest as her gaze settled on Hattie, sprawled in blissful abandon. A thin line of drool traced its way down the corner of her mouth, and Alice smiled, her heart bursting with affection.

She sat up and rested her chin on her knees as her thoughts drifted. Freedom. The word stretched and bloomed in her mind like a flower unfurling under a long-awaited sun. Hattie’s love had given her something

she hadn't realized she was searching for. The thought was exhilarating, a current that rushed through her veins.

But then, like storm clouds gathering on a bright horizon, the weight of reality crept into her thoughts. Home. Society. Expectations. The life she had left behind whispered insistent reminders of propriety, duty, and what a woman like her was supposed to become. A wife. A mother. An obedient daughter. This—*this*—could not be reconciled with those demands. Her happiness curdled into guilt, and her smile faltered.

"Sweetness?" Hattie's voice was thick with sleep, her brown eyes blinking open. She propped herself up on one elbow, her unruly hair forming a halo of dark waves around her face, "What's the matter? You look like you've been chasing a gloomy rabbit."

Alice hesitated, her hands fidgeting with the hem of her dress, "It's... nothing."

Hattie frowned, her gaze sharpening, "Darling, you're many things, but a liar isn't one of them. Out with it."

The gentle command loosened the words Alice had been holding back, and they tumbled out in a rush, "I can't keep my promise, Hattie. I can't... stay like this forever. I have to go back. Back to my world, back to... reality. There are expectations I have to fulfill, things I'm supposed to do."

Hattie sat up fully now, "Expectations? Alice, what about what *you* want? What about your happiness? You're free here—you're free with me."

Alice's throat tightened, guilt and frustration warring within her, "But I'm not, Hattie! Not really. Maybe you don't care about what's proper, but I've spent my whole life being shaped by it. It's not that easy to just leave it behind."

Hattie's expression darkened, her voice tinged with a rare sharpness, "You're telling me you'd trade this—us—for the cage you call home? Why? To be someone else's idea of perfect?"

"It's not that simple," Alice snapped, "I can't just... abandon everything I've ever known. You wouldn't understand."

"No," Hattie said, her voice rising, "I don't understand. I don't understand how you can make love to me, promise me, and still think about running back to a life that doesn't want you to be *you*."

Alice stood abruptly, her chest heaving as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her, "I don't want to talk about this anymore. We should get moving. I must meet the Mock Turtle."

“Fine. Go on. I knew you’d leave. Everyone leaves when the tea gets cold.”

“You know that’s not what I’m doing, Hattie?”

“Isn’t it?”

“I have—I can’t—You—You wouldn’t understand.”

Hattie opened her mouth as if to argue further, but the look on Alice’s face stopped her. With a frustrated sigh, she threw on her coat and grabbed her hat, her usual playfulness replaced by a stormy silence.

They set off down the winding path, their footsteps heavy and their hearts heavier still until they found their intended target.

The Mock Turtle sat atop a weathered rock in the clearing, his drooping features were full of melancholy. His sigh, deep and drawn-out, rippled the stillness of the air as Alice and Hattie approached. The Gryphon lumbered beside them, his movements slow but purposeful, as though he carried the weight of Wonderland’s eccentricities on his broad shoulders.

“Once, I was a real turtle,” the Mock Turtle began, not even bothering to ask the women who they were or why they were there. His voice lilting with sorrow, “Oh, those were the days of proper shells and sea dances. But here, in this place, reality folds in on itself, and the past becomes a tale so ridiculous, one can hardly tell it was ever true.”

Alice listened intently, her heart pulling toward the Mock Turtle’s strange sadness. His stories unfolded like a series of disjointed dreams.

As he spoke, Alice began to understand that Wonderland, for all its chaos and contradictions, was a refuge as much as it was a challenge. The Mock Turtle, with his wistful eyes and nonsensical truths, was as much a part of this place as she.

“Even in the most peculiar sorrow, there’s a melody of joy—like a teacup found in a tempest,” Hattie said softly to Alice without looking at her.

Alice nodded, the Mock Turtle’s tale settling within her like a puzzle piece clicking into place. With all its madness, this strange land had a way of revealing the beauty in imperfection, the strength in vulnerability, and the wonder in being unapologetically oneself.

As the Gryphon encouraged the Mock Turtle to continue his tale, Alice glanced at Hattie, whose face clearly said, *We belong here, in this madness, in this magic.*

Alice's head tilted, her brows knitting together in confusion as she parsed the Mock Turtle's lamentations, "But... what does being a 'mock turtle' mean exactly?"

"It means he's absolutely real, just in an unreal way," Hattie said.

"Exactly! You understand!" the Mock Turtle exclaimed, "I was once a real turtle, you know. But the Queen turned me into this... this... mockery!" The last word came out as a pained whisper.

Large tears cascaded down the Mock Turtle's cheeks. They fell with the exaggerated pomp of a performer. His sobs were theatrical, yet beneath the performance lay a genuine grief.

The Mock Turtle heaved a final, shuddering sob before composing himself with a sniff.

The Gryphon, in a sudden flurry of feathers, cut through the melancholic air with a voice both robust and commanding, "Enough of this sadness! Show them the dance, Mock!" His proclamation ricocheted off the imaginary walls of the mock turtle's grief.

The Mock Turtle heaved himself upright, his flippers shuffling against the soft earth, "It's only proper they see the Lobster Quadrille."

Chapter 10

The Lobster Quadrille

With a grave nod to the Gryphon, the Mock Turtle commenced his instruction in the art of the Lobster Quadrille, “First, you throw the lobsters out to sea.”

“Then,” the Gryphon interjected, “you reel them back in, all while spinning counterclockwise.

“Unless, of course,” the Mock Turtle added, “you’re feeling adventurous.”

Alice stared wide-eyed, and found herself surrendering to a peal of laughter, “Of course that wouldn’t make any sense.”

The Mock Turtle paused mid-flipper wave, his doleful eyes blinking in mild surprise at Alice’s laughter. It was as if the sound had tugged at some forgotten string in his heart, one that hadn’t played a note of joy in far too long. The Gryphon tilted its head, and joined in with a deep, rumbling chuckle.

“Ah, laughter,” the Mock Turtle sighed, his voice carrying a note of bittersweet nostalgia, “Such a rare and peculiar thing these days. But it does suit this dance.”

“Even sorrow needs a partner now and then—a step to follow, a beat to lead,” Hattie said.

“Shall we try it, then?” Alice asked. She glanced between the Gryphon, now stretching its wings with enthusiasm, and the Mock Turtle, who nodded solemnly as though preparing for a great undertaking.

Awkwardly, Hattie offered a hand to Alice, “The Lobster Quadrille waits for no one, not even lovers quarrels.”

Alice only half-smiled at that.

The Gryphon clapped its claws together, “Pair off! Find your rhythm! And don’t forget to throw the lobsters just right—or they might pinch you!”

Alice accepted Hattie’s outstretched hand. Together, they stepped into place, following the Gryphon’s shouted instructions and the Mock Turtle’s hesitant flipper waves.

“Step two to the left! Bow! Now reel them back!” said the Gryphon.

With a whirl, Hattie’s hands found Alice’s waist, pulling her into the orbit of their dizzying dance. Around them, the Mock Turtle supplied a tune as peculiar as the scene itself. Alongside him, the Gryphon kept time, his claws tapping a rhythm that was both syncopated and soothing.

“Whoops!” Alice exclaimed, her footing faltering amidst the flurry. Each step was an uncertain venture into new territory, “I don’t know how to do this!” she protested, her voice threading through the laughter bubbling up around them.

“Simply let go,” Hattie said, “The dance knows its own way.”

Alice stumbled, her movements awkward as she tried to keep pace with the lively rhythm of the others. But Hattie’s hand in hers was steadying.

“You’ve got it!” Hattie said, “Spin, Alice! Spin like the world is yours!”

And so she did. She spun, her laughter mingling with Hattie’s, their steps a joyous rebellion against everything that made sense.

“Look at you!” Hattie said as Alice’s feet now capered with confidence across the grass, “There’s my Alice,” she whispered tenderly. The warmth of her gaze wrapped around Alice like a comforting shawl.

“Your Alice,” she echoed back with a hint of sadness to her voice.

“Marvelous!” said the Gryphon, “The best Lobster Quadrille I’ve seen in centuries!”

Alice glanced at Hattie, whose cheeks were flushed and eyes bright. The Mock Turtle, though still solemn, wore a faint smile, and even the Gryphon's stern demeanor had softened.

They stopped spinning, their laughter trailing off like the last notes of a lullaby. Hattie and Alice, still wrapped in the dizzying euphoria, stepped away from the dance. They were breathless, chests heaving.

"Goodness," Alice panted, "I haven't felt so—"

"Alive?" Hattie offered.

"Yes, that's it!" Alice said, her smile broadening. Her heart was like a hummingbird fluttering against the cage of her ribs. She looked at Hattie, whose hair was tousled from their dance, a few strands defiantly escaping her hat, and her heart beat that much faster.

"Smiling suits you," Hattie said.

"Perhaps I should do it more often," Alice said.

"Only if it pleases you," Hattie reminded her, "Remember, my love, we're not here to perform for anyone's expectations."

Alice sighed.

"Truce?" Hattie asked.

Alice stared at the hand that was offered to her and said, "There's no use wasting whatever time I have left in Wonderland not talking to you. You have changed my life and I absolutely don't care that the tea has gone cold. It could freeze for all I care. But I do feel the weight of certain things that are greater than me. I suppose I might as well make the most of the time I have with you here."

The girl smiled at the Mad Hatter, shook her hand, and then kissed her lips softly.

They made their way to the beach. Hattie found her spot, settling on the warm grains with her legs spread, forming a welcoming vee. Alice nestled between them, leaning back into the crook of Hattie's chest.

Hattie's heart was a steady drum against Alice's back.

Alice turned her head slightly, catching Hattie's impish grin in her peripheral vision, "You're impossible, you know that?"

A playful chuckle unfurled from Hattie's lips, carried away by a gust that toyed with the loose strands of her hair, "And you're finally starting to enjoy it."

Alice's response was a dance of hesitation. Then, like sunlight breaking through a stubborn cloud, her smile dawned, gentle and tentative,

“Maybe I am.”

The waves lapped softly at the shore, and Hattie traced idle shapes in the sand, her movements unusually subdued. She then faced forward, her chin resting on Alice’s shoulder, “You’re happiest when you stop trying to make sense of everything. It’s beautiful to see.”

A gentle warmth spread through Alice’s chest.

She met Hattie’s gaze, her heart full of an emotion she couldn’t name but felt deeply. Her voice was quiet but sure as she said, “I think... I’m happiest when I’m with you.”

Hattie hugged Alice a little tighter.

They were quiet for some time, just enjoying the view, but Alice’s thoughts started to gnaw at her. She tugged at the hem of her dress.

“You’re thinking too hard again. Careful, or your head might burst.”

Alice let out a small laugh, the sound breaking through the tension in her chest, “I’m just trying to find the right words.”

“Right and wrong are overrated. Just say words. Any words.”

Alice hesitated before beginning, “I was thinking... maybe...” Her usual poise faltered, uncertainty creeping into her voice.

Hattie waited patiently, her hands caressing the girl’s arms in encouragement.

Finally, Alice blurted out, “Perhaps the flowers are all gossiping about us right now!”

The comment hung in the air for a moment before both women burst into laughter. Alice’s cheeks flushed, but the warmth of their shared amusement eased her nerves.

Hattie leaned in and whispered in her ear, “I’ve been waiting for you to embrace the madness.”

Alice looked behind her to meet Hattie’s gaze, her heart racing, “Maybe it’s not so bad.”

Hattie’s grin softened into something gentler as she brushed a strand of hair from Alice’s face, her fingers lingering just long enough to send shivers down Alice’s spine. Slowly, she leaned in, and their lips met in a kiss that carried the weight of all the unspoken truths between them.

When they parted, Alice’s lips curved into a small smile, “Do you think the sky is jealous of the stars?”

Hattie chuckled, “I think it might be.”

This time, when their lips met, the kiss was deeper, more certain.

They slowly lay side by side in the grass as they kissed. Their hands moved with gentle strokes, fingers tracing paths across arms, shoulders, and faces.

Alice broke the silence, her voice barely above a whisper, "I've always tried so hard to make sense of things. But with you, I don't feel like I have to."

"You've always had your own kind of sense, Alice. You just needed someone to see it."

Hattie produced a lily from the same place she seemed to produce everything else she pulled out of thin air. She carefully tucked it behind Alice's ear, her grin returning, "There. Now the flowers have something to gossip about."

Alice stared at her for a moment, her heart swelling with an emotion she could no longer keep bottled in, "I'm in love with you," she blurted out.

Hattie's eyes widened briefly before a wide, delighted grin spread across her face. She leaned closer, her tone playful but full of sincerity, "Then I suppose we're a pair of love-struck loons," she said, before adding, "because I'm absolutely mad about you too."

Their laughter blended with the wind as they kissed again, their love now a truth as vivid and undeniable as the world of wonder they shared.

Alice and Hattie lay entwined in its embrace, their laughter mingling with the whispers of the sea breeze as they shared a kiss, soft and sweet as a remembered dream.

"May I make love to you?" Alice asked. Hattie nodded, brown eyes piercing blue ones.

As their kiss deepened, Hattie's breath became a hitch and she let her hands wander.

With a delicate boldness, Alice's fingers slid under the fabric of Hattie's trousers, venturing past the barrier of cloth and lace, finding soft curls.

Hattie's hand, a mirror to Alice's own boldness, journeyed with tender purpose along the length of Alice's legs. Her touch climbed like ivy, heartened by the rhythm of Alice's quickening pulse, until it slipped beneath the hem of Alice's skirt. The soft fabric of her panties yielded to Hattie's questing fingers, and she found Alice's desire, warm and welcoming.

A deep grunt escaped Hattie's lips, textured with wonder and want, "You are absolutely soaked, my love. Is that all for me?" Her voice was hoarse.

Alice's gaze locked onto Hattie, her eyes, once a clear summer sky, now deepened into twilight; pupils expanded with a fervor that swallowed the pale blue, "All for you."

Their hands wandered with a purpose both tender and insistent. Fingers traced the contours of their desire with the gentlest touch upon their outer selves.

And then Alice plunged two fingers into Hattie's essence. The taller woman's response was another throaty groan.

Hattie's hand mimicked Alice's and their breaths mingled.

With every push and pull, their breaths quickened, hearts drumming a fervent beat against the cage of ribs. Kisses deepened, urgent and sweet, a testament to the craving that swelled within them like the tide rushing to meet the shore. They moved together, fingers entwined in the fervid depths of intimacy, drawing forth sounds Alice never thought possible.

"I'm sorry," Alice said as a sob escaped, "I'm so sorry I can't be what you need."

"I just need you to be you," Hattie said with a kiss.

Hattie tasted salty tears on her lips as she tried to comfort Alice.

As their pleasure intensified, so did the speed of their fingers. And then, the sensation in Alice's stomach crested the waves of her desire, followed quickly by Hattie's.

Afterward, they lay wrapped in an embrace, chests heaving silently, the quiet after the tempest.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Hattie murmured as she wiped another tear that slid down Alice's cheek.

Alice's response was a laugh, light and effervescent, bubbling up from the wellspring of joy that Hattie's whimsy always tapped within her.

The soft glow of Wonderland's ever-changing twilight bathed them as they lay together, limbs intertwined, their breaths still slowing from the fervor of their love. Alice's fingers traced absentminded patterns along Hattie's collarbone, her thoughts heavy despite the lightness of the moment.

"I'm not strong enough," Alice whispered finally, "Not strong enough to abandon everything for this. For you. For me. Even if it means... being caged."

Hattie propped herself up on her elbow, her wild black hair casting soft shadows across her face, “Cages are dreadful things, even the gilded ones. But if you must stay in one, promise me you’ll at least decorate it with flowers and nonsense. Make it your own.”

Alice’s eyes brimmed with tears once again, her chest tightening with love and sorrow, “You make it sound so simple.”

“Simple?” Hattie scoffed, reaching over to pluck an imaginary thread from the air, “Nothing in Wonderland—or life—is simple, sweetheart. Not tea parties, not love, and certainly not choices. But let me tell you a tale, if your ears are feeling curious.”

Alice nodded, her gaze fixed on Hattie as she settled back against the sand.

“Once upon a time—because all good tales start that way—there was a girl who lived in a world so dull, the clouds refused to drift for fear of disturbing the monotony. It was a place of straight lines and straight faces, where people folded their dreams into tidy little boxes and stacked them away like forgotten socks.” Hattie’s voice was playful, but a shadow lingered in her eyes.

“This girl, she was... peculiar. Not in the way that made others smile, mind you, but in the way that made them whisper. She asked questions when silence was expected, danced when the world demanded stillness, and painted her thoughts in colors no one else could see. They called her mad.”

Alice reached out instinctively, her hand finding Hattie’s, “What did she do?”

Hattie’s smile returned, a touch sharper now, “Well, at first, she tried to fold herself into one of those tidy little boxes. She clipped her dreams and smoothed her edges, thinking that if she could just be flat enough, ordinary enough, they might let her stay. But the thing about madness, dear Alice, is that it doesn’t like being silenced. It crept back in, tickling her toes and tugging at her hair, until one day, she said, ‘Fine! If I must be mad, then I’ll be gloriously, riotously mad!’”

Her voice lifted, her hand sweeping through the air as if scattering stars, “So, she wore her madness like a crown, not to hide her, but to illuminate her. But crowns are heavy things, and the world didn’t take kindly to her rebellion.”

Hattie’s grin softened into something wistful, “They took everything from her—her house, her family, her friends. She watched her life tumble

like a house of cards in a storm. And oh, she missed them, Alice. Every crooked tile of that little house, every warm laugh over a shared cup of tea. But through it all, she never lost herself. And to her, that was the most important piece of all.”

Alice’s grip on Hattie’s hand tightened, her throat thick with emotion, “That must have been so lonely.”

“It was. The kind of lonely that echoes in your bones. But the girl learned something in that emptiness. She learned that the world could take everything—her walls, her loved ones, even her name—but it couldn’t touch her spirit unless she let it. And so, she built a new life, one where madness wasn’t a cage but a key.”

Alice blinked back tears, her chest aching, “That’s why you struggle to understand me, isn’t it? Because I can’t make the same choice you did.”

Hattie tilted her head, “Oh, my love, struggle is just a fancy word for trying too hard. I don’t understand you, it’s true—but not because I don’t want to. You see, my world was all bricks and chains, while yours has ribbons and expectations. They may be different cages, but they’re cages all the same.”

She leaned in, brushing a stray curl from Alice’s cheek, “I can’t judge your choices by my own, my darling. We’re all our own riddles, and only you have the answer to yours. But whatever you choose, promise me one thing?”

Alice nodded, “What?”

“Don’t let anyone steal your ‘you.’”

Chapter 11

Who Stole the Tarts?

As the two companions' conversation filled the air, a new sound broke through—distant and unmistakable. The Gryphon's voice boomed from beyond the dunes, pulling them back to reality.

"Chorus again!" cried the Gryphon, and the Mock Turtle had just begun to repeat it, when a cry of "The trial's beginning!" was heard in the distance.

It was a reminder of the world waiting for them. Alice felt the pull of that sound, gently breaking the bubble of their seclusion. She met Hattie's eyes, sharing a look that acknowledged the moment's end and the inevitability of returning to the world.

Hattie let out an exaggerated sigh, "I suppose we should go before the Gryphon starts choreographing our lovemaking."

Alice chuckled. "Then let's not delay."

Together, they stood, brushing sand from their clothes.

"Come on!" cried the approaching Gryphon, and, taking Hattie and Alice by the hand, it hurried off, without waiting for the end of the song.

"What is happening now?" Alice asked.

“The trial! It’s beginning!” The Mock Turtle repeated.

“What trial is it?” Alice panted as she ran, but the Gryphon only answered “Come on!” and ran faster.

The grand hall loomed as Alice and Hattie entered, the sound of rustling and whispered conversations filling the air. Creatures of every sort—animals in waistcoats and card soldiers in crisp suits—shifted restlessly in their seats.

Alice scanned the room, taking in the mismatched jury. A rabbit tapped impatiently at his watch, while a two of spades squabbled with a nine of diamonds over a shared bench. The scene felt more like a circus than a courtroom.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Alice muttered. Hattie responded with a knowing smile.

At the center of attention was a grand platter piled high with tarts. Their beauty was overshadowed by the tension in the room, the Queen’s voice slicing through the commotion.

“These are the stolen tarts!”

The Knave of Hearts stood nearby, shackled and trembling, the chains on his wrists clinking softly. His face was pale, his fear evident, “I didn’t—I wouldn’t—” he stammered.

“You’ve stolen my tarts, you scoundrel! Confess!” the Queen roared. Her subjects echoed her cries, a chaotic chorus of “Off with his head!” that grew louder with each repetition.

Alice’s chest tightened as she watched. The Knave’s terror was palpable, and his pleas were drowned out by the noise. She felt a pang of sympathy for him, caught in what seemed to be an unfair game.

The jurors, a mix of animals and playing cards, appeared more distracted than dutiful. They scribble nonsense on their slates, including doodles and illegible phrases. One card soldier wrote, “Guilty, probably, maybe, not sure.”

The Knave’s eyes met Alice’s for a brief moment, and in that glance, she saw a silent plea for understanding.

“This can’t be a proper trial,” Alice whispered, more to herself than anyone else.

“Of course not,” Hattie said, “It’s a spectacle.”

The Queen’s vizier stumbled forward, clutching a gavel that seemed far too large for his awkward hands, “We shall now hear evidence from...

whoever wants to speak!”

For a moment, the courtroom froze. Then, as if on cue, the room erupted in eager murmurs and shuffling, each creature vying for the chance to add their voice to the cause.

Alice stood quietly beside Hattie, who leaned in close, “Best courtroom drama you’ve ever seen, right?” She produced a bucket of popcorn from nowhere and threw one in her mouth while offering some to Alice.

A flurry of wings interrupted the proceedings. The accusing Pigeon Alice recognized from days earlier swooped into the courtroom, feathers askew and beady eyes glinting with fervor.

“Serpent!” the Pigeon screeched, pointing a trembling wing directly at Alice. “The tarts were stolen by her kind! Serpents slither and steal—mark my words!”

Alice gaped, utterly bewildered. “I am not a serpent!”

While I would love nothing more than to accuse that child,” the Queen started, “I assure you she is not the one on trial here.”

The Pigeon flapped furiously, its voice rising to a pitch that made several jurors wince. “Egg thieves and forked tongues! They creep in the dead of night, slithering through shadows with their triangular heads and flickering tails! Oh, I know their kind—sly, silent, and ever so sneaky!”

Alice tried to protest, but the Pigeon wasn’t finished. “I’ve seen them with my own eyes! One moment, my precious eggs were nestled safely beneath me, warm as a summer breeze. The next—gone! Gone, I tell you! And all because of their slippery schemes!”

The courtroom murmured, half-convinced by the Pigeon’s feverish accusations.

“You may wear the guise of a girl,” the Pigeon continued, thrusting its beak accusingly at Alice, “but I see through it! Beneath that innocent face lies a serpent’s cunning! Admit it—you’ve been plotting this all along! First my eggs, and now the tarts!”

“Enough!” the Queen’s voice interrupted. She clapped her hands for silence, glaring at the Pigeon. “This is a trial, not a stage for your hysterics!”

The Pigeon fluttered back indignantly, muttering about injustice and the untrustworthiness of serpents masquerading as ladies.

Next, the smoking Caterpillar, who had since transformed into a most curious butterfly, flew to the center of the courtroom, and took the stand—or rather, lounged upon it. He exhaled a ring of multicolored smoke and drawled, “Who is to say the tarts were ever truly here? Perhaps they are an illusion, a figment of desire. Or perhaps...” He paused dramatically, taking another puff, “they were eaten by time itself.”

The courtroom buzzed with puzzled whispers.

The Queen’s voice boomed again, “You! The Mad Hatter! Step forward and testify.”

All eyes turned to Hattie as the Queen pointed her jeweled finger at her.

With a grand bow, Hattie bent low and handed the bucket of popcorn to Alice, “As you wish, Your Majesty. Though all I have to offer is tea and riddles.”

The courtroom seemed mesmerized, watching her ascend the stand as if she were a performer taking the stage. Every movement was deliberate, her confidence radiating as she prepared to speak.

“Ahem. I was once having tea with the Dormouse, who insisted the tarts were made of starlight.” A gasp rippled through the jury, their curiosity clearly piqued.

“Naturally,” she continued, “I tried one, but it turned into a clock!” The jury buzzed with confusion.

Alice stood back, letting the bizarre tale unfold.

The Queen’s sharp voice cut through the chatter, “Enough riddles! Tell us the truth!”

“The truth?” Hattie said, “Now that’s the most elusive tart of all.”

The Queen’s frustration grew as the room held its breath. Hattie, however, seemed unfazed, plucking a porcelain teacup out of thin air. With a flick of her wrist, she sent it spinning into the jury box, “To refresh their memories!”

Chaos erupted as jurors scrambled to catch the cup. Cards fluttered, animals scurried, and a flamingo spilled ink all over its feathers.

Amidst the uproar, Hattie turned her attention to the Knave, bound in chains. She approached him, her expression curious yet playful, “Did you steal the tarts? Or did the tarts steal you?”

The Knave’s wide eyes betrayed his confusion, his silence only deepening the room’s collective bewilderment.

The Queen's voice cut through the noise, "Silence! You're making a mockery of my court!"

Alice felt a flicker of defiance. She stepped forward, her voice steady despite the absurdity of the situation, "Your Majesty, perhaps if you listened —"

Before she could finish, the Queen interrupted with a bellow: "Off with her head!"

Chapter 12

Alice's Evidence

The crowd gasped, and for a moment, Alice felt the weight of those words. But before fear could settle in, Hattie stepped in with a grin, "Surely, Your Majesty, you wouldn't execute someone who hasn't had tea yet. That would be terribly rude."

The Queen's voice thundered across the courtroom as she pointed her scepter at Alice, "Seize her!" she commanded, her guards surging forward.

But Alice, standing tall—literally—was already one step ahead. She reached into her pocket and ate some of the mushroom that now felt like second nature. In an instant, she shot upward, her form towering over the guards. The courtroom's ornate ceiling became too low for her now, and the Queen stumbled back, her imperious scowl faltering for the first time.

"Careful, Your Majesty," Alice said, her voice resonating through the chamber. She leaned down, her enlarged frame casting a shadow over the Queen's throne, "I might just step on something important."

The guards hesitated, unsure whether to obey the Queen or to retreat from the giant standing before them. The Queen, regaining her composure, barked, "Get her, you fools!"

Alice grinned cunningly. Before the first guard could step forward, she had another bite of the mushroom and shrank down in an instant, darting

between their legs. The guards crashed into one another as they scrambled to locate her tiny figure.

“Over there!” one shouted.

Alice reappeared at full height on the other side of the courtroom, her smile mischievous, “No, over here!” she called, before diminishing once more to evade another lunge. This time, she climbed up the edge of the Queen’s table, growing just enough to flick a teacup onto the floor, where it shattered loudly, startling everyone.

Shrinking again, she zipped across the courtroom floor, dodging boots and lunging guards. She reappeared full-size just behind Hattie, scooping her up effortlessly and placing her on her shoulder as she grew larger than ever.

With Hattie perched comfortably, Alice turned to the Queen, “Maybe, Your Majesty, you should consider that the tarts weren’t stolen. Maybe...” She let her voice hang dramatically, glancing around the room before finishing, “...the tarts stole themselves!”

A collective gasp echoed through the courtroom. Even the Queen looked momentarily stunned, her face frozen mid-sneer.

Hattie laughed merrily.

Alice raised her hand to quiet the murmurs. She stepped forward, her larger form making each step resonate like a drumbeat, “But why are we even here, debating tarts, when so much more is at stake? Your Majesty, your court isn’t a place of justice—it’s a place of fear.”

Her gaze swept across the room, meeting the eyes of the guards, the courtiers, and even the trembling subjects peeking from behind the gallery doors, “You all live under the weight of her temper, always one wrong word away from losing your heads. Is this how Wonderland should be? Is this what you want for yourselves?”

Her voice grew firmer, “I say no! Wonderland isn’t the Queen’s to control. There is no controlling madness! Why let one person hold that power when you all deserve to share in it?”

Hattie clapped enthusiastically from her perch on Alice’s shoulder, “Bravo, Alice! A revolution wrapped in a speech with mayo on top. How deliciously fitting!”

In the quiet that followed Hattie’s applause, the air shifted as a silvery mist appeared above the throne. It solidified into the Cheshire Cat, its wide grin cutting through the tension like a crescent moon.

“What a delightful trial!” the Cat purred, “So much noise, so little sense.”

The Queen turned crimson beneath her crown and pointed at the Cat, “You there! Cat! Leave this instant!”

Unbothered, the Cat flicked its tail and replied, “If sense were nonsense, and nonsense were sense, would we all be guilty?”

Alice’s mind tried to grasp the riddle, but it slipped through her thoughts like sand. The court was equally baffled.

The Queen’s face grew darker with rage, “Guards! Remove that insolent beast at once!”

The armored cards scrambled clumsily toward the Cheshire Cat, who vanished and reappeared effortlessly, evading their grasp.

The irate Queen grabbed a flamingo from beside her throne and charged at Alice, “Don’t forget this pest of a girl!”

Alice, now towering over the courtroom, looked down at the Queen with calm authority. As the Queen stormed forward, her elaborate dress flapping behind her, Alice reached out, her giant hand stopping the Queen in her tracks.

“Enough,” Alice said firmly, lifting the Queen with care, her feet dangling just above the floor. The Queen squirmed, her crown tipping sideways, but Alice placed her back down gently, as if setting a fragile object in its proper place.

“Enough,” she repeated, this time with finality.

And just like that, the courtroom began to dissolve. Alice’s breath quickened as the world around her began to unravel. The vibrant colors of Wonderland, once so vivid and alive, were bleeding into one another, dripping like wet paint on a forgotten canvas. The different subjects wilted, their limbs crumbling into ash before vanishing entirely. The air itself felt thinner, leaving behind an eerie stillness.

“No, no, no!” Alice cried, reaching out to grab something—anything—but her fingers closed around nothing but air. The ground beneath her feet flickered, alternating between solid earth and an endless void. She stumbled, clutching at the fabric of her dress as though it might anchor her in place.

“Hattie?” she called, her voice trembling, but the Mad Hatter was nowhere to be seen. A shadow of her laughter, faint and distant, echoed through the fading landscape.

The ornate ceiling of the courtroom was now a swirling mass of grays and blacks, spinning like the inside of a storm. The peculiar creatures of Wonderland flickered in and out of existence. The Cheshire Cat's grin appeared for a fleeting moment, only to dissolve like smoke, leaving behind a faint trace of mirth.

Desperation clawed at her chest. Alice lunged toward a chair that was rapidly dissolving, her fingers brushing its leg just as it faded into nothingness. "No! Not like this!" she pleaded, tears spilling down her cheeks.

The silence pressed down on her like a weight, the absence of Wonderland's chaos more suffocating than its noise ever was. She curled into herself, trembling, her golden hair spilling over her shoulders like a veil.

Then, everything shifted.

Alice found herself lying in a park under the twilight sky. The grass was soft beneath her, and a gentle breeze brushed against her cheek. Above, the sky stretched wide and calm, its colors serene and inviting. Gone were the strange creatures and nonsensical conversations. Here, the world was still and peaceful.

She blinked, taking in her surroundings. This place was everything Wonderland was not—quiet, steady, and grounded.

Alice sat up slowly, her hands brushing against the warm grass. Her heart still raced, but the calmness of the meadow began to soothe her. She looked around, half-expecting to see a familiar grin or hear the distant echo of Hattie's voice. But there was only silence.

She took a deep breath, her mind replaying the memories of Wonderland—the laughter, the chaos, and the creatures. A pang of longing welled up inside her. Was it all just a dream? Had any of it been real?

"Hattie," she whispered, the name slipping out like a plea. The stillness around her gave no reply. Panic bubbled up, and she called out louder, "Hattie! No... no, no! Hattie!"

Her voice broke through the quiet of the meadow, but the only response was the soft rustling of the leaves in the breeze. Alice's chest tightened as she searched for a sign, anything to prove that Wonderland and Hattie hadn't been just a figment of her imagination.

Yet, as her calls faded into the air, a quiet realization settled over her. Wonderland, with all its strange and wonderful moments, was gone—out of

reach.

The sound of her name snapped Alice out of her thoughts. “Where have you been?” Lorina, her sister, asked. “Mother has been looking for you! You need to get ready for the Charmichaels. They’re coming over for dinner, and Mother says you’re to marry their son, Charles! Isn’t that grand?”

The words hit Alice like a bucket of cold water.

“Wed?” Alice repeated, incredulous. Her eyes sharpened with disbelief, “Marry that—that pompous puffin? I’d sooner dance the Lobster Quadrille with a school of snarky snails!”

Her hands clenched, and her chest tightened as the weight of the idea bore down on her.

“Enough of this nonsense,” Lorina said sharply, grabbing Alice’s arm and pulling her toward the house.

They climbed the staircase to Alice’s room, a place that once felt like a haven but now felt more like a stage for her impending doom. Her mother flitted about, pulling dresses from the wardrobe, while her sister chatted about dinner arrangements and Charles’s supposed virtues. Dinah, Alice’s cat, lounged on the bed, her indifference a stark contrast to the frenzy around her.

“Stand still, dear,” her mother said as she tugged at Alice’s corset laces, pulling them tighter and tighter. Alice’s breath caught, and the room felt smaller with every pull.

“Just imagine,” Lorina said, her voice light and airy as if she were narrating a dream, “Dinner parties with the finest families, Charles at your side, his hand resting ever so lightly on yours as you share a private joke. You’ll host luncheons in the garden, the roses in full bloom, while your children play on the lawn. Two boys, I think, and perhaps a girl later. Of course, the house would be grand—something with tall windows and drapes imported from France. You’ll have staff for everything, of course, so you’ll only need to manage them and keep everything... perfect.”

Alice’s head swam. Words fell from her sister’s lips like drops of honey, but they stuck to her like flies, buzzing incessantly in her ears. *Dinner parties, Charles, roses, children*—the words piled atop one another, suffocating her with their sweetness.

“You’ll be the envy of all,” Lorina continued, her hands clasped in front of her like she could already see it unfolding, “Charles will adore you,

Alice. He's such a kind man—did I tell you how he helped Mrs. Thatcher with her accounts? And he's so patient. He won't mind if you make the occasional social misstep; he'll gently guide you, you'll see. And oh, the dances you'll attend! Just imagine the gowns, the music, the admiration in everyone's eyes."

Alice's breath came quicker, shallower, a treacherous flutter in her chest. *Gowns, music, eyes*—all of them watching, waiting, demanding. She could feel them already, those eyes, crawling over her like ants. Each imagined pair dissected her, stripping away the quiet warmth she once claimed for herself, leaving only an empty shell wrapped in silk and lace.

"Alice, stand still!" her mother snapped, jerking the laces tighter. Alice gasped, her vision wavering as the room seemed to fold inward. She was shrinking again, but not like in Wonderland—this was worse. This shrinking didn't come with wonder or whimsy.

"Charles's family is very respectable, you know," Lorina went on, heedless of Alice's growing silence, "His mother will adore you—she's quite traditional, but she'll see your charm in time. And once you're married—"

Married. The word hit Alice like a slap, sharp and cold. Married to Charles, to his house, to his family, to his life. Her mind raced, skittering from thought to thought like a trapped bird battering itself against a cage. *To love him? To live for him? To forget myself entirely?*

Her gaze darted to Dinah, lounging indifferently on the bed, her tail flicking with lazy disinterest. *Do you understand, Dinah?* she thought wildly. *Does any of this make sense to you? Or are you too free to care?*

"Alice, are you even listening?" Lorina's voice cut through her spiraling thoughts, sharp and insistent.

No, no, no, I am not listening, I am drowning, Alice wanted to scream, but the corset stole her breath, pressing her ribs into her lungs, her lungs into nothingness. Her hands twitched at her sides, useless, and her thoughts clawed against the inside of her skull. *I cannot breathe here. I cannot live here. This room, this house, this life—it is eating me alive.*

Her mother tugged once more at the laces, and Alice felt her knees weaken. The walls of her childhood room were closing in, the once-comforting furniture mocking her with its staid permanence. *Where is the door?* She thought. *Where is the air?* The world swirled around her in

colors too bright, too loud. Roses and gowns and children and windows—*stop, stop, stop*—

“Alice!” Lorina’s voice broke through again, her hand gripping Alice’s arm, “You look pale. Are you unwell?”

Alice blinked, her vision tunneling. She opened her mouth to speak, but the words tangled in her throat, crushed under the weight of the life Lorina had spun for her. The life she could not bear. The life that was swallowing her whole.

And then, through the corner of her eye, Alice spotted out the window the White Rabbit hurrying past, his pocket watch clutched tightly in his paw. He moved with his usual urgency.

Alice’s heart leaped. Without hesitation, she began pulling off the layers of lace and ruffles, letting them fall away. She stood in only her slip.

Barefoot, she dashed down the staircase. Behind her, voices rose in confusion and disbelief.

“Wherever are you going, Alice? What will people think?” her mother called after her.

“Come back this instant!” her sister demanded.

But Alice didn’t stop. She slipped out the door, leaving their cries behind, muted by the solid click of it shutting behind her.

Outside, the air felt fresh, the garden a mix of orderly hedges and wildflowers under the evening sky. She took a breath, her bare feet sinking into the earth with each step forward. Then, between the rows of hedges, she saw her—the tall, lanky figure with an unmistakable presence.

Hattie’s movements were casual, her top hat slightly askew atop her unruly hair.

Their eyes met, and for a moment, the world paused. Hattie provided her with that unmistakable grin of hers.

Alice’s lips curved into a smile and she ran.